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Autor Note

Hello and Thank you for choosing to read this book!

Right at the start I would like to inform you that I'm not the best writer and this book will go under heavy editing.
So if you find any mistakes please don't be shy and inform me. I really appreciate it!

This book is an original! If you find any similar books it's is purely a coincidence.

The schedule should be easy! One chapter a week - usually mondays. I will try to publish them at the same hour but it may change.
I also may go on a little Hiatus later on.

Thank you for reading this little Autor Note! And for reading this book!

Chapter 1

,,You know, hitch-hiking isn't the best idea for a young girl like ya" The middle aged man chuckled as he stared at the street. He scratched his chin where his long, neatly braided beard was. He glanced at me, waiting for my response.

I gave him a playfull smile ,,Oh no, is the big bad truck driver planning something?"

He barked with laughter before shaking his head ,,I'm just sayin ya know? Not everyone is as nice as me"

,,Then I'm lucky" I smiled at him ,,Besides, I know a few tricks to get me out of trouble, Mr Dixon"

,,Okay kid listen, it's Neil. Don't call me Mr, I feel old"

I nodded and noticed the street sign. I was getting closer to my destination, Finally. It took me almost four days to get here.

,,You can drop me off at the nearest gas station or anywhere you like. I can walk rest of the way" I pointed at the sign.

,,Sure thing kid" Neil nodded and looked at the nearest possible spot to stop his truck.

Neil was a really nice guy. A little quiet but he had a good sense of humour. Not to say his truck was really comfortable. Truck drivers have a really nice job. Sure, they sit hours on end but they visit a lot of places.
Almost like me.

Neil stopped next to the gas station closest to my destination and we said our goodbyes. I tried to give him money since he drove me over 200 miles but he refused.
What a nice guy.

I waved him one last time as he drove off and I went my own way,

next to the street. It felt nice to stretch my legs after so long. I had over 5 miles and then I will be finally at my uncles place.

It took me almost a hour and a half to finally see the first house of Athabasca. Glad that nothing changed, well maybe expect a few new cars and garden equipment, everything looked just like last year when I came to visit Tío.

I saw his house at the corner of the street. The dirty white walls of the little house with overgrown yard that screamed the word ‚abandoned' greeted me like last time I was here. It almost suprised me how this neglected place always looked the same, I always expect that it will look worse or finally someone will take pity on it and cut the grass.

Last time when I wanted to do so my Tío assured me that he will do it himself after I leave. Looks like he forgot his words, again. Trying my best to avoid getting ticks, I sprint to the front door and knock a few times.

Waiting for the answer I notice one neighbour wave at me. The old lady, probably in her 80s, smiled and started coming over. Not wanting her to walk that much, and because nobody was apparently home, I skipped towards her.

„Hello there miss Patel!" I smiled brightly at her.

She smiled as well. „It's nice to see you back in town" She pointed at the house behind me „You know, this house needs a strong woman hand. Then it wouldn't look like that."

I knew what she wanted but that just wouldn't work. I couldn't stay in one place for too long, since I loved traveling and my uncle was a disaster.

„Miss Patel, you know I can't stay but I promise to save this poor yard when I have the time" I grinned and helped her towards her door. When I reached for the doorknob she just pointed at her rocking chair on her porch.

When she sat down she smiled and looked at the miserable house

across the street. Her clean house with neatly cut grass was a stark contrast to the pitiful pile of brick and wood that my uncle called his home.

,,He left the key under the plant pot" She grumbled and shook her head ,,To think that he isn't even here to welcome you"

I giggled a little and patted her shoulder lightly. ,,He's a strange one for sure but a very loving man. I'm sure when he gets older he will... well get his thoughts on the right line"

She gave a weak smile and a small nod ,,I only wish to be still alive when that happens"

We talked a little more until she had to go inside and escape the cold air that crept up. She offered me tea but I politely declined.

When I opened the door of the house, I was suprised to find that it was neatly cleaned, expect a few papers scattered on the kitchen table. There was half full cup of cold coffee and sandwich that had maybe two bites.

It was almost evening so Tío shouldn't be gone for much longer. I knew that his work could take overtime sometimes but he usually ended earlier when I came.

The kitchen table had a few papers scattered here and there. There was even some on the floor, so I picked them up.

,,Molecular structure of... Unstable... Possible antibodies... and so on. Still the boring science stuff as usual huh?" I skimmed through the paper and placed it back on the table.

I yawned and decided to nap until Tío comes back. From the corner of my eye I saw my beloved couch in the corner. After quickly thinking about it, I decided that the couch was way more comfortable then the bed in the guest room.

I stirred awake from my nap by the sound of keys opening the door. Heavy footsteps echoed from the hallway and a thud of something

heavy hitting the ground. I kept my eyes closed as I listened as Tio finally came back.

He walked around in the darkness until the light switch illuminated the hallway with a click. His footsteps carried him to the kitchen where he walked around and his cup of cold morning coffee was put down, then he finally made it to the small living room where his footsteps stopped.

It was quiet for a few moments until he walked away and came back, this time not stopping in the doorway. He came right up to me and laid a heavy blanket on top of me with a quick kiss to my temple.

With that his footsteps disappeared back to the kitchen and probably his room. Since he decided to sleep I relaxed and let the sleep claim me once more.

I woke up early in the morning by my phone ringing. I looked who it was before answering.
,,Goodmorning Eva" I greeted my friend with a yawn.

,,Hey Benji" Her morning voice sounded from the speaker ,,Why did we agree to do this again?"

It was way to early to ask me questions so it took me a while to process what she said.
,,So you won't oversleep? Either you call me when you wake up for school or I wake you up whenever I wake up"

,,Dumbest decision we ever made" She groaned ,,So did you make it or are you still on the way?"

I chuckled as I knew what she meant. We made a small deal five days ago. If I can get here in less than five days I win, if it will take longer she wins.

,,You owe me a sushi box" I said with a small smile.

She groaned deeply ,,Fine. So, how's your uncle?"

,,Tio? I didn't have a chance to talk to him yet"

I got up with a stretch and changed my clothes as Eva explained what kind of school exams she has today.

I heard rustling in the kitchen, probably Tio.
,,Well good luck with your exams. I need to go now, call me later today, Okay?"

,,Okay, I will call after my first or second period"

She hung up and I made my way towards the kitchen where Tio was already sitting and browsing the papers with a frown.

,,¡Buenos días tío Pedro! ¿Cómo estás?" I greeted him with a smile and hugged him from behind.

He turned around and smiled softly before ruffling my hair. ,,You cut your hair again" He smiled and pointed at the empty chair next to him ,,How was your trip?"

,,Went smoothly. How about you? You don't look exactly overly happy" I noted.

His smile fell a little before he shook his head and collected all the papers he had on his desk.

,,Well, as you know I quit my job in the laboratory a few weeks back. My friend called me however that things there are getting out of hand" He rubbed the bridge of his nose ,,And apparently a small vial got lost"

I looked at him curiously and flinched as his hands suddenly flew upwards.

,,And they think I was the one who stole it!" He growled and shoved the papers in a cupboard ,,Seriously! how stupid someone has to be to come up with such a thing. I left and three weeks later it dissapears and they are blaming me!"

,,cálmate" I patted his hand and looked out off the window. I had no idea what he was talking about.
I knew he wouldn't steal anything, he's to kind for that.

,,Have you found a new job?" I asked and got up. I needed something to drink and he needed coffee or calming tea.

,,No, haven't looked for anything yet. I have some money stashed away" He sat down and looked at some pictures that hung on the walls.

It was a picture of me, my father and him. I was maybe two or three and we all were on the beach. Only half of my fathers face was visible, as he was the one taking the selfie, Tío Pedro was building a sand castle and I was sitting there with a yellow plastic shovel.
I don't remember it but the picture held the memory for us.

Tío clearly misses him. I miss him too. He was the most cheerfull man alive, always smiling and joking around as if he was still 15.

I finished making our drinks and put them on the table before sitting down and looking at the picture once more. Our silence was cut by a ringtone, it wasn't my phone.

Tío grabbed his phone from a counter and answered.

,,Hello?" He got up and went to his room ,,Yeah it's Mr. Who else would it be"

I sipped my coffee in nice and calming silence, debating when should I cut the grass. Tío could use some help with the work around the house. At least until I'm here.

Tío suddenly ran up to the cupboard with his phone still next to his ear. He looked through all the papers until he grabbed one he looked for and slammed it on the counter.

,,Are you sure?" He muttered and looked at whatever was written on the paper before flipping it on the other side. ,,Okay, thanks for telling me. Stay safe"

He hung up and turned towards me. ,,Xiomara go and pack your bag" Tio turned around and dissapeared in his room.

I got up and followed him ,,Is something happening?"

,,Yes and it's happening sooner than I thought" He grabbed his clothes and shoved them inside a duffel bag.

,,What's happening?" I questioned.
He was way too serious and it unsettled me.

,,Just go and pack! I will explain everything in the car" He shoved another handful of clothes in the bag before grabbing a shoebox from under the bed.

I went to the living room and grabbed my bag. I haven't actually opened the bag since I got here so I was packed already.
Tío came rushing through the door and grabbed his key to the car.

I walked behind him as he sprinted towards his jeep and threw the bag in the back seat. He grabbed my bag and opened the door to the passenger seat for me. I climbed in, still confused and waited as he shut the house door and got in himself.

,,Got everything?" He asked as he started the car.

,,Yeah? Why are you acting as if a bomb was about to explode?"

,,That stupid experiment leaked!" He growled and pulled out of the small wooden shack. The tall grass smacked the car as he backed up and began driving on the asphalt road.

,,Okay that's it! What experiment?" I groaned and glared at the scenery outside. The houses were switched by trees as we left the town.

,,A dangerous experiment that shouldn't been made. And to think I worked for that company!" He gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white.

I was unsure how to answer or react. He never got upset let alone angry. Since I remember he was the typical laid back uncle or a emotional mess.

,,Soo, are we driving to stop the leak?" I questioned and looked at the bags in the back seat. He packed so much I wouldn't be suprised if he had every piece of clothing in his house.

,,No" He scoffed as if this was the most ridiculous question in the world ,,We're going because that crazy CEO will probably blame it on me and I don't want to explain myself to the government"

I stared at him as my shoulders lifted slightly. ,,Wouldn't it be better if you actually explained that it wasn't you? And not run like if you did it and tried to escape?"

,,Even if I did explain it they wouldn't believe me. That's the difference between those who have money and those who don't. She will buy her innocence. Not that she will have enough time, with how fast it spreads."

My phone rang and I remembered about Eva. I picked up the phone and answered, leaving the situation for later.
,,Hey there. How's the day going?"

,,Hey Benji. It's going fine, except that one failed exam. I really hate Psychology" She groaned.

,,Well, it can't be that bad? how many points you got?"

She was quiet for solid five seconds before answering ,,23 out of 100"

I bit my lip and suppressed my laugh. ,,See not that bad, you still got 23 points"

,,Very funny. How's your day going? Since your crazy uncle is a disaster fanatic, I guess you're watching some world ending movies or something"

Tío Pedro glared at my phone from the corner of his eye as he opened his mouth but closed it right afterwards. Clearly he felt insulted but at the same time he knew Eva was rather non-filter type of person. She talked before thinking sometimes and it got her in a lot of trouble many times.

,,You said it yourself. You're on loud by the way" I grinned and observed the scenery as we drove by.

She was silent for a few seconds. ,,Please don't tell me your uncle

heard me" She squeaked.

,,I did" Tío grumbled, still focused on driving who knows where.

,,Mr. Benjamin, I'm so sorry! I didn't think and my mouth jus-" he cuts her off before she starts a whole speech.

,,Doesn't matter. Get your stuff and get somewhere high! A building or something. At least seven or eight meters high!"

,,What?" She was clearly confused like me. Since Tío hadn't explained anything. I was starting to believe he has just gone insane or was worried that the lab will accuse him of stealing.

,,Then will you tell me why we are on the run?" I asked, looking him in the eye.
He looked down emotionally, clearly thinking how to explain it in a matter that I will understand. He loved speaking in his scientific way.

,,There was a leak at the laboratory. A very dangerous cloud formed. It's very deadly and reactive in darkness. Until the sun is out we should be fine but at night it will expand and expand until another sunrise"

Eva and I listened to him quietly, fascinated even. Eva was a nerd for science so it was clearly more fascinating for her.

,,Then why aren't we warning others?" I asked. It was unlike him to just run and throw others to the wolves.

,,The military will take action" He growled ,,But I doubt they will want to help us, well... Me more likely. I helped with the development before I knew what it even was."

,,So you're on a run because there's a cloud?" Eva sarcastically asked, clearly thinking it was a joke or something ,,Okay, until the radio or TV won't inform us I'm not believing a thing"

,,It's your choice Eva" Tío mumbled ,,I'm not asking you to believe me but if the fog comes, get to the higher ground. On a roof or something"

,,Fine" I could hear the bell ringing through the phone ,,I have to go, I have one more exam ahead of me. Good luck with your 'apocalypse' Benji"

I knew she meant Tío as the apocalypse, since he enjoyed talking about the end of the world a little to much. But I never saw him so serious about something.

,,Is that cloud really that dangerous?" I gave Tío a slightly worried look. My life is a mess already and I don't need any more problems.

He nodded his head slowly, gripping the steering wheel in a tighter grip. He turned on the radio and we were met with static, that didn't suprise me. His car had problems here and there but since it was still running he refused to get a new one. It took him a solid five minutes to get a frequency that didn't sound like falling gravel.

,,If it really leaked then no one is safe, but if we don't see it for two weeks, then we will go back and I will never do something like this ever again. Deal?"

I nodded and listened to the reporter on the radio. Currently she was talking about climate change.

,,Promise?" I asked so quietly that I thought he didn't hear me.

,,You have my word Xio" He patted my shoulder.
He heard me. It will be okay, right?

Chapter 2

,,We're here" Tio stopped the car and got out.

After a short drive we arrived in the middle of nowhere. Maybe it felt like a short drive because I'm used to ten or even twenty hours of driving.
We stopped in front of a little tree house. Who build it? I have no idea, but it looked rather cozy.

,,Where are we?" I asked, curiously looking around at the scenery. The greenery and gentle wind made a serene sight. I wouldn't mind waking up to this silence. I was so used to travelling between cities that this quiet atmosphere felt like refreshing cold water in a hot day.
In other words, I like this place.

,,We're between three lakes. Some miles north-west from Athabasca" He grabbed some bags out of the trunk before making his way to a make-shift ladder. At first glance I could tell that I didn't trust it.

,,So, we're staying here? for a week?" I eyed the structure and grabbed my bag before getting out of the car myself and closing the door. I walked up to the ladder and after a brief hesitation i started climbing up.

Tio called from the top. ,,Two weeks not one"

When I finally reached the top I glanced around in the almost barren room. There was only one table and three chairs. Some planks, nails and a hammer laying around.

,,Didn't know you can make furniture" I stared at the wooden constructions in shock. Tío grinned before placing some bags on the table.
The table swayed a little but didn't break. If I was the one making it, it wouldn't even look like a table. Let alone stay standing.

,,I made the table but the chairs are Coopers work" He grabbed something from one of the bags. When I looked over his shoulder I noticed that it was a sealant.
,,Cooper? I think you mentioned that name before"

,,When you were younger, he came and helped me fix the leak in the roof. He even wanted me to work with him but I already got the job at the laboratory"

,,Well, that didn't work out so well" I commented and watched as he sealed the window frame.
,,Do you need me to do something?" I asked glancing around the room and noticed how new the wood smells.

,,Can you hang the hammocks? They should be in the bag on the table"

True to his word I found the hammocks and tried to figure out how to actually hang it. After five minutes on struggling I managed to hang it properly. The second one took shorter time to hang.

,,Done!" I grinned at my work and decided to check if I even did it properly by laying in one.
And I apparently did.

Tío finished applying the sealant and the smell was rather unpleasant.

,,Hungry?" Tío asked as he grabbed another bag and went to one corner of the room where a wooden box was. It blended so well with the wall that I didn't even notice it at first.

,,I have some dried fruits and vegetables and some canned stuff here if you want to take a look" He said as he emptied the bag full of water bottles and started to sort the food he had.

This place seemed way too prepared but I decided to keep quiet for now. For all I know he's just mistaken.

,,Shouldn't the government warn people if something is happening?"

Tío without stopping answered my question ,,They probably already

know since the lab has to tell them if something like this happens. They just don't know how to tell the people and since that thing is spreading in the darkness, they have time to prepare. Later they will just collect the people and try to solve this mess"

,,If they collect people why did we leave? We would be fine. Besides aren't you a scientist? They could use your help."

He got up and shook his head ,,Not really. I worked on it yes, but only on a few strands. The guy that called me this morning, he was inside the lab when the fog leaked. He isn't even sure what strand it was."

I still couldn't really understand everything. Strands? ,,The Fog? How many strands were there? What do you mean?"

,,Hard to tell" He grabbed a few cans of tomato soup and a pot ,,I worked on strand 13 and 27."

I stayed silent and watched him heat the soup over a portable stove. He glared at the stove when it didn't turn on and started checking it.
,,Well looks like we're eating cold soup today" He growled.

I snickerd and went to help him.
,,Well, first thing first" I grabbed a gas bottle and handed it to him.
,,Make sure you bought the non-electric one"

He grabbed the bottle and mumbled under his breath a quick ,,Right" before finally managing to lit up a fire.

As he stirred the pot I went to check what we had here. I rummaged through some clothes before finding a compass, several sheets of paper, electronic lighter and a small radio.

,,How do I turn it on?" I turned the radio every way before trying a few buttons.
Tíos hand grabbed the radio and he showed me a little switch on the back, before switching it on. The silence after the click was defining.

,,I can swear I put batteries inside" Tío opened a small hatch and

took out two batteries. I eyed the radio before remembering I had some spare batteries in my backpack.

I grabbed it and emptied almost everything until I found four exact same batteries still in the pack I bought them in.
,,Will these fit?" I handed them to him and he immediately put them in.

,,They fit fine" As soon as the second battery was inside the radio blasted static and some words that were hard to hear.

,,Don't burn the soup" I eyed the steaming pot next to us and Tío immediately stirred it, giving the loud radio to me.

I played a little, trying to find a working station for a while, and I luckily found one.

The man was talking about the weather at the moment. Sunny and a little bit of clouds.

,,Seems like the public doesn't know yet" Tío mumbled and grabbed two plastic bowls.

,,Will they even be warned?" I took the bowl he gave me and sat down on one of the chairs that was surprisingly sturdy.

,,Knowing my boss? The military and government know already. I don't know what are they waiting for"

I sipped the warm soup and thought how could something like this happened. If something happened at all. But since Tío promised that if nothing shows up in two weeks it should be fine.

,,Soo, what now?" I ask as I look for anything that at least resembles a spoon ,,Want to play cards?"

We end up playing cards for a few hours. Tío even showed me a magic trick with them and I try to mimic it. It was getting rather dark and Tío was getting more and more restless.

He was looking out of the window a lot and checking the time, as well as scribbling some notes in his journal. I ended up writing to

Eva but since it was getting late and my battery was draining rather fast I texted her a goodnight. She didn't have problem with it as she wanted to study for tomorrow.

I stretched across the entire hammock and yawned. I loved a good night sleep and this was rather comfortable. I managed to doze off, but something woke me up.

Tío was still looking out of the window and mumbling something under his nose.
I got up and went towards him.

,,Tío? Why are you still awa-" I stopped as I saw something that was unnatural.

,,It's here" Tío mumbled as he gazed at the teal, slightly glowing mist outside.

I could feel my heart beat speed up. Tío wasn't lying. He warned me and it really came.

,,The Fog"

Chapter 3

I couldn't sleep after witnessing the teal fog. My mind just kept reminding me how Tío said that it was dangerous and deadly. And I just couldn't imagine how.

Tío went to sleep later that night and is snoring like a bull. The sun is about to come out and I felt like a corpse. It wasn't my first sleepless night but it definitely was one of the most stressful ones.

I watched from the window as the unusual fog swirled gently in the wind. It somehow expanded so much over the night, that I could barely see the truck.
My anxiety was rising every moment I blinked so I grabbed my phone and opened my contacts. I don't have a lot of them, most from places I used to work from time to time.

I found Eva and called her. Every ring made me more scared of what could have happened. Is Eva OK? What does that fog even do?

,,Benji!" Eva cried when she picked up ,,I was so worried sick! The alarms started blaring in the middle of the night and some people in hazmat suits came and yelled at everyone!"

She was sobbing at this point. I was so glad to hear her voice and some of my stress instantly melted away.

,,Eve, you have no idea how scared I was. Are you okay?" I glanced at Tío but he was still snoring in his hammock.

,,Yes, me and mom went upstairs. Dad went to help one neighbour with his wheelchair but hasn't come back yet." Eva sobbed ,,The dudes in hazmats told us to stay inside and away from the mist and wait for next orders, I'm scared!"

,,I'm glad you're safe. They will evacuate you to a safe place, I'm sure of it" I tried to assure her.

,,They said something about evacuation but I'm not sure about it. Why haven't they evacuated us yet?"

,,Maybe they don't have the vehicles needed to evacuate the entire continent?" I tried a little joke, even if it came up a little dry.

,,Right. Oh and they apparently will start broadcasting some info on the radio around noon" Eva sniffed but she was clearly calming down.

,,Did they say where you will be evacuated?"

She mumbled 'wait' and clearly was moving around and ask someone the exact same question I asked.

,,Apparently somewhere close to the crystal falls" She sounded rather unsure but that information was like a gold vein to me. If I ever want to find her I will know where to look, even if I had no idea where that was. I can ask her when she gets there hopefully.

,,I will see if I can get there" I quickly check my phone battery
,,Okay listen, I don't have a lot of battery left. I will turn my phone off and preserve the battery. If something new comes up just send a message and I will read it at the end of the week and respond"

,,Okay, stay safe. Oh and say sorry to your uncle from me, please?"

,,Yeah sure, be safe" I say and let her end the call. I turn my phone off and wait for Tío to wake up.

I glance outside but have to do a double take. It seemed like the fog was fading away.
Was it just dissapearing? So the crisis is over in one night?

I wanted to ask Tío but he was still snoring and I didn't want to wake him up. He wouldn't be annoyed but I knew he didn't sleep much today.

I may be able to wake him up using food but at the same time I was a terrible cook. But I do know how to make some coffee.

I managed to make a pot of coffee and after I let the fresh smell fill

the room, Tío started to grumble. He stirred awake and sleepily grabbed himself the hot cup.

,,Good morning" He yawned and drank his hot beverage in one sip ,,Is the fog still there?"

He looked outside and his eyebrows lifted slightly. ,,So it isn't 22 or 8"

,,What?" I looked at him as he grabbed his jornal and started writing something. In the meantime I looked for my toothbrush. When I finally found it in the side pocket of my bag I started to look for the toothpaste.

,,The strand or type of the virus" He said as he kept writing in his journal ,,There are around 94 strands and I'm trying to find out which one leaked"

94? Just how many viruses did they make?

,,Oh right! I talked with Eva and she says sorry and also that there's a broadcast or something on the radio"

That caught his attention.

,,A broadcast? About?"

,,Not sure" I shrugged ,,Didn't hear it yet. Apparently it's supposed to start around noon"

He nodded and grabbed a pancake mix and a pot.
,,Then we wait. Oh can you pass me a water bottle?"

I passed him the bottle and watched as he mixed it with the powder from the box. Then he cooked the batter into pancakes.

They were rather bland but I didn't mind. Considering my cooking skills those pancakes were a gourmet food.

We waited for the noon with some games and books Tío had with him. I took a lot of interest in an encyclopaedia with plants and animals. Reading about venomous snakes and what their venom

could do to blood was rather fascinating.

When the time was around noon Tío started trying to find the broadcast on the radio.

,,Found it!" He cheered as he brought the small radio closer and sat it at the table.
A woman voice loudly announced.

,,Last night a mysterious teal mist spread through the entire continent. Many calls flooded the 911 line, begging to know what was happening. Luckily the Canadian government started working with the United States to locate the source of the gas and they found it. A laboratory that belongs to the company BlueBell in South Canada appeared to be in its epicenter. The canadian president along with their military have contacted the company demanding answers to this leak.
The CEO of the company, Aiden C. Bluebell, responded:

'There was a small incident resulting in a chemical cloud or fog, however you want to call it. It's dangerous to living beings as the chemicals used are quite harmful or possibly deadly to organisms. We ask you to stay away from it.'

The rest of the statement was not released to the public. Most of the country is thrown into panic with many people screaming from their windows, throwing objects and so on. Many houses were filled with the 'Fog' and the residents who were exposed to it are put into quarantine.

The government shared that this mysterious mist will probably find its way into other continents, as it's already been reported in Russia, making this a world crisis until it is successfully cleared out.

The military is working on setting up safe spaces and the evacuation of effected areas will begin this week.
The safe spaces will be under the military care as to reduce the possibility of protests and riots.
We are ending this report with a warning to all of you near the fog - Stay away from it, keep all of your family safe and hold out as help is coming your way!"

After she finished speaking there was a small pause and then she repeated it. Me and Tío sat in silence, I mostly waited for him to start speaking. He was the leader here. I hoped that he would eventually decide to go to one of those safe spaces.
They may require a quarantine but should let us in.

,,Okay, we will stay here for some time. At least until I figure out which strand it is or until the BlueBell scientists clear that fog." He finally got up from his seat and made his way to the window.

I made myself comfortable in my seat as I realised that we will rot here for some time. At least I will know what a prison cell feels like.

Not even five minutes later Tío groaned and slammed his notes on the table.
I looked at him from behind my book and lifted an eyebrow.

He walked in a small circle and rubbed his head and face, clearly upset about something.

,,Whats the matter?" I inquiried quietly as I set the book down and wait for his answer.
He had a despondent look in his eyes.

,,I left my work journal in the shelf, if I had it I-" He cut himself out and rubbed his forehead once more.

,,Can't we just go and get it? It's only a few hours to get there and back. We can also get more stuff and maybe get evacuated" I suggested and got up. I may make tea while I'm at it.

,,No, no, if we go back now they will run a check on us and quarantine us. If they do a background check on me and find out I worked in the BlueBell? There's no way they will let me go without answering questions"

,,Then you can answer the questions and who knows, Save the world from a deadly fog?"

He stared at me as if I said something dumb.
,,They will skin me alive"

,,You are way to much paranoid" I retorted ,,They won't kill you for working in the laboratory that had a leak. Besides you quit before that happend, so it's not like it's your fault"

He just shook his head and mumbled something under his nose. He clearly didn't believe in what I said.
I knew he was insecure but I didn't know he was that scared. I knew facing angry people was hard but it's apart of everyone's life. We cannot jump this obstacle no matter how hard we try. I learned this the hard way in school.

,,We can also stay here but it will take you longer to figure it out right?"

He nodded and sat down. At this point the water was boiling so I made us some tea, unfortunately we didn't have lemon.

,,I can try to get in contact with one of my previous colleagues. He worked there longer and had a lot more projects than me" he tapped his finger on the table as we waited for the tea to cool off a little.

,,Isn't he in quarantine then? Every scientist at the lab probably is, since it's the epicentre?"

He shook his head and smiled a little.
,,No, he quit long before I did. Actually, he was the one who found out something was wrong and told me to be on high alert. Thanks to him I figured out that what we were doing had nothing to do with cures"

,,Then is he being evacuated?"

,,Maybe, won't know until I ask him" Tío fished out his phone and dialed a number. I listen carefully to the beeps but nobody picks up. Tío, clearly upset, puts the phone down and glowers at it.
,,Thick-headed donkey. He never picks up his phone"

I stare at him in mild amusement, as I know the pain. Eva tends to sleep through anything, I even think that Tíos snoring wouldn't wake her up.

,,Well, you can try later or wait for him to call you back" I grabbed a box of cards and laid them on the table ,,How about a game or two?"

He looked at the cards and then at me.
,,I hope you're ready to lose"

,,In your dreams" I grin and the game begins.

We played for quite some time before a phone rang. Mine was off so the only option was Tíos phone. He picks it up immediately after looking at the caller ID.

,,Cooper! About time. What took you so long?" Tío Pedro put his cards down as he talked to his friend.
I waited as this guy called in the moment I was about to win.

Unfortunately for Tío, he left his cards facing upwards, revealing his cards. Now i knew that I will win for sure.

,,Okay, so you will be evacuated but you don't know if you will stay? What about your family, I can always go there"

I couldn't hear what that Cooper guy was talking about so I tried to piece every bit of information I got. It felt a little weird to ask later what he said.

,,Okay, I will send you the general location" He glanced at me and smiled.
I had no idea what was happening so I just gave him a thumbs up.

,,Ye, see you" Tío ended the call and smiled slightly.
,,He and his family are getting evacuated but he doubts he will stay in the fort. So after the winter he plans to meet with us"

It was smart to stay in a safe place during winter, after all, they had food and water. We might need to scavenge to survive through it.

,,Do we have anything that might be useful for hunting?" I asked as I placed my victory card on the table.

,,I can make some snares and I should have a bow somewhere here.

I will need to make the arrows" He pondered as his gaze finally fell on the table, noticing my card.

He stared at it until shooting me a doubtful glance. ,,Cheater"

,,Fair and square" I grinned ,,But we can have a rematch if you want"

Chapter 4

I checked the window for the third time today as I waited for the Fog to dissapear. Yesterday we agreed that today we will go outside and get supplies.
To say I was exited to go outside was an understatement. I was locked up here for a week already and it was getting hard to sit in one place.

I ended up reading several books about plants and insects. I would never do this in my free time. Usually I would sleep or plan my next route. I didn't really care about insects or types of grass but at this point, any form of entertainment was welcomed.
Why did Tío have so many books here?
I wish I knew.

In the end I found out that palm trees were actually a form of grass and bees can fly up to 60 miles a day. Usefull? Not really.

I waited impatiently as Tío Pedro made breakfast and glanced at me from time to time with a smirk. He knew I wanted to go out already and not be caged by four wooden walls. Not to say the food from a bag was beggining to taste rather dull and something fresh would be a welcome.

,,Patience is bitter, but its fruit is sweet" He said as he stirred the porridge from the bag in the pot.

I looked at him and raised one brow
,,Don't tell me you started reading poetry"

He chuckled and grinned at me before reaching to his bag and pulling out a book.

A poetry book.

I tried my best not to crack a smile. It was even called 'Poetry Book'. I turned back to the window and tried my hardest not to laugh. My

shoulders were trembling from the strain.

,,Want breakfast?" He asked and poured me a bowl, even though I haven't answered yet. I didn't have to, I love food.
I thank him and grab the bowl before digging in with a plastic spoon and burning my tongue in the process.

,,Slow down, the bowl won't run" Tío sat down next to me and glanced outside himself ,,Let's pack after breakfast and go"

I nodded excitedly and thought what I should bring with me. Definitely some water and a second sweater if the weather gets colder, after all it's October already and it gets rather cold in the evenings or rather its always cold.

We ate our porridge in no time and were getting ready to go outside for the first time in the entire week.
Tío had to scratch the sealant from the hatch frame before opening it.
He slowly climbed down while I slid down the ladder.

Taking in the wonderful smell of the trees and mushrooms that were apparently growing somewhere. Tío will have to check later if they were edible as I have no idea which ones are.

I instantly headed towards the car and opened the door, only to instantly shut them afterwards.

,,Tío?" I called and he turned towards me ,,We may have to walk" I pointed at the car.

He looked inside and grunted.
,,It got inside. Well, I'm not risking it. C'mon, unless you want to stay"

No way I'm staying here. Even if our transportation was out of the question I was happy and ran up to him. Happily walking and observing all the trees and listening to the birds singing all around us.
I missed this feeling of freedom.

,,You know? This isn't so bad. It almost feels like one of my travels.

I ended up having to camp whole week in the forest because I made a wrong turn!" I smiled at the memory and kicked a pebble.
I waited until I was close to the same pebble before kicking it again, unfortunately it went flying to the shrubs.

Tío Pedro snorted at me.
,,I still can't understand how you could move all the time. Everyone has to find a place to grow roots at and yet here you are. Going where you want, when you want" He sighs as he looks at the road ahead of us ,,Just like Hugo. Carefree"

,,Atleast you know that I'm his daughter"

He ruffled my hair as we walked on the dirt road. If I remember correctly it will take us some time to reach asphalt, let alone a city or a gas station.

It took us almost 4 hours to reach a city and it was nearing lunch time, we have to cross a bridge first to get there.
,,What river is this?" I asked as walked on the bridge.

,,Athabasca River"

,,Really? So I will get to Athabasca if I follow upstream or downstream?"

,,Go with the flow and you will get there, but for now welcome to Smith"

,,It's too small to call a town, don't you think" I observed and noticed a post office as we walked through the streets.

,,Well, it's a hamlet actually"

,,Hamlet? Now you bringing up Shakespeare?" I pointed at the post office.

He laughed and headed towards the post office before looking inside.
,,No, Hamlet is a term for a settlement that is smaller than a town" He furrowed his eyebrows before looking around ,,Evacuated already? I thought it will take some time before this place gets

evacuated"

Now that he mentioned that, I realised that we hadn't met anyone alive, except birds and fish in the river.
While looking around I saw a general store and a liquor shop.

,,Well, people were evacuated, but they maybe left the stores alone"

Tío nodded and walked up to the general store ,,Probably because of the fog"
I walked towards him and looked inside to see the teal mist close to the ground and leaving empty spots where the sun illuminated.
He tried to opening the door but it was locked but thankfully it was made of glass so a rock will solve the problem.

,,Okay, I will open the door and you go get a long stick or something" Tío looked around for a rock on the ground and I looked around for trees.
There weren't any branches laying around so I might need to snap a branch.

I walked up to the closest tree and looked back as I heard the glass shatter. Tío broke the window and was now making sure that the shattered glass wouldn't injure us by laying his jacket down. I turned around ready to climb when something caught my eye.

A stop sign. It wasn't a branch but it should be okay, if I can lift it, that is. Grabbing a pole I gave a tug and supringly it moved and wasn't all that heavy.

,,Xio, got anything?"

,,Yes!" I grabbed the stop sign and gave it to him ,,Here"

He looked at it before using it to drag out the items to the sunlight. It was mostly bags of chips or candy but it was still food.

After a while I packed and organised the food Tío got, while he was trying to get other items like flour or sugar.
He managed to get a bag of salt and shatter a bottle of wine in the meantime.

I heard a scraping sound that he wasn't making.
,,Tío?"

,,Yes?" He still was trying to get the flour without touching the teal fog.

,,I think I heard something?" I looked at every corner until I saw what was making that sound.

,,Oh, it's a dog" I smiled at the dark gray mutt dog that was staring us down.

Tío instantly stopped and stood in front of me.
,,Don't get too close to it"

,,Why? It's just a dog"

,,Infected with that fog" Tío slowly backed up and grabbed one bag, before giving it to me.
,,I'm still not sure which vial leaked so I don't know how it will react.

The dog wasn't wagging its tail and didn't stand still. Instead it paced in almost a circular pattern. It was too far away to hear if it was growling but I did notice how it was making those scraping sounds.
It had a chain dragging behind it.

Suddenly the dog started barking and growling but didn't approach. Not that it made me feel more secure.
Tío started yelling.

,,Get out of here!" He waved his arms above his head and stomped his feet. The dog flinched backwards before barking a few more times and running off.

I watched as the dog disappeared in one of the yards, before glancing at Tío.
I had no idea what to say or do.

He grabbed the other bag, before going down the street, right where the dog went.

,,What are you doing?" I ran after him, courius yet worried at the same time.

,,They evacuated the people, but left their pets behind. That means that farmers might left their chickens in coops. And if I remember correctly, no matter what vial leaked, all of them had the same thing in common. If you cook or boil the meat, it's edible"

I blinked a few times at this new information.
,,What kind of experiments were you making? Or rather eating?"

,,High temperatures kill the viruses and some of the chemicals, so while it is edible, it's not that healthy to eat" He explained as he looked behind every fence.

He was taller than me and I had to stand on my tip toes to look over some fences. He stopped at another fence and looked over before scowling.

It was one of the tall fences so I stood on my tip toes and looked over as well.

,,Well, we found the chickens" I commented

,,Something got to them faster than us"

All the chickens were dead. Feathers layed in the grass and some meaty chunks very scattered around.

,,Maybe the dogs?"

,,Maybe" He sighed before looking at the house ,,We might find something else inside instead"

We made our way around the neighbourhood and peeked inside the houses and decided which we will loot.
We will come back to the ones that we won't manage to loot today. After all we still had to walk back to the cabin and seal it before the fog rolled in.

It started to spread faster after the first night. Hiding in dark places that shielded it from sunlight and then spreading at night. The first

night it took it almost three hours to reach the cabin after the sundown.
Now it takes only ten minutes.

We didn't find much in terms of fresh food but we did manage to get our hands on some fishing gear and dried food. Then it was time to go back.

As we walked back to the cabin I tried to find any wildlife that weren't birds, but didn't have any luck. I didn't even see a squirrel or a rabbit and it wasn't like we were in a city. We were in a middle of nowhere.

,,Stop" Tío suddenly stopped.
I stopped next to him and watched for any danger ahead.
I heard an engine of a car coming from behind a small hill. We were currently in the forest so the sound was rather hard to make out with the wind swaying the leaves.

,,Hide" Tío ducked behind some shrubs.
I looked at him and slowly made my way after him.

,,Why are we hiding?" I asked as we waited.

,,Be quiet" Tío whispered sternly.

We sat there and listened as the sound of the approaching vehicle grew closer until several cars loaded with people drove by. There were some military uniforms and a few guns but mostly normal people. Young and old.

As they drove away I turned towards Tío and deadpanned
,,Are you really that scared?"

He ignored my jab and walked back on road after the convoy left.
,,Evacuation is still ongoing" He mumbled.

I walked out of the shrubs and checked if I didn't have any twigs or leaves in my hair.
,,Does that mean that there is a safe space close by?"

He shrugged and continued walking.

Sometimes I don't get him.

When we finally made it back to the tree house I started unpacking and Tío sealed the hatch.
It was also time for dinner so Tío made some soup with what he had. It somehow tasted like chicken soup, even though there was no meat in it.

I grabbed my phone and turned it on. I didn't check for any messages from Eva since we talked last time. I took my phone and turned it on only to see five texts from her. I started reading the first two as they were sent on the same day.

,,Eva got evacuated to a fort called Crystal Falls Fort" I looked at Tío as he looked over.

,,That's pretty far away. Michigan if I remember, somewhere close to Wisconsin." He pondered

I made a mental note of this and read another texts.
The next one was probably sent from the fort already and was rather long so I read it out loud.

,,They made medical tests today. Mom and I are fine but they kept dad in the infirmary for a long time and when he came back he said that he was tested positive for the 'Fog bacteria' and he will be under observation and isolated at nights. And if you're wondering, apparently the virus isn't contagious. The fort itself looks more like a prison, tall walls and watchtowers. The dude in charge looks like a pirate but he is nice. Other than that, there's a lot of people here. Maybe around one thousand. Text back when you can and take care"

Tío scrunched his nose in annoyance ,,What do they mean by 'Fog bacteria'? It's a virus!" He grumbled a little more ,,But her father got infected, that's not good. There's probably more people inside who had contact with the fog"

,,Will he be sick?" I asked

,,If he is only sick he is lucky. Did she write something more?

Details perhaps? Like, eyes changing color or trouble talking? Spasms?"

,,Give me a second to read first"
I quickly checked my battery before reading the two remaining.

,,Hey, guess what! I got a job in the kitchen. The other seven ladies and two guys working with me are super nice. One lady was tested positive so we have a guard with us, but she's chill as well. The only problem is that we have to cook for thousands or so people. Dad is doing good, he just complains that his feet are itchy and slightly inflamed. He is also grumpy, because he noticed his first graying hair."

,,Inflammation and itching are symptoms of almost all the strands" Tio commented.

The last text was a short one.
,,I'm trying to get a better job but until I turn eighteen I have to work in the kitchen. Those two months of waiting will be the longest two months of my life"

I couldn't help but smirk at this. She said the exact same thing when there were only three months of school left.

I started typing as fast as I could one long reply.

,,Hey. Glad to hear that you made it safely to the fort. We are doing alright ourselves. Today we been outside for the first time in a week and walked for almost ten hours, only to discover a ghost town, a dog and some food. On the way back we also saw evacuation convoy and Tío got scared"

Tío shot me a warning glare and I gave him my most innocent smile.

,,I was hoping to find some fresh food but after a week some of it got spoiled without electricity and some we couldn't reach. I still have no way of charging my phone so you will have to wait until next week. Take care and say hi to your parents from me and Tío Pedro"

I sent the text and turned the phone off. I really need to find a way to charge it.

We sat in silence for a moment until Tío cleared his throat.

„Want to go fishing tommorow?"

Chapter 5

I looked through the window of an abandoned building in the little town. We came back for any supplies we could actually get and even clothes. Winter is here and the weather is getting colder every day.

The wardrobe was on the opposite side of the room and that stupid teal mist was there. Probably inside the wardrobe as well, but a small shelf was right under the window I was looking through so I marked the building with a strip of yellow cloth for Tío.

He was taking somethings from the neighbouring houses kitchen. We went mostly for cans or food that wouldn't easily spoil and since the electricity was apparently cut off.

I have no idea when it was shut down, I even tried the switches in several homes, at least those I could reach and they didn't turn on. Refrigerators definitely didn't work and I'm not about to find out what smell could the freezers hold.

After all it's almost the end of the third week since the fog appeared. Tío was mumbling a lot about his work journal and some strands. I asked him once about it and he responded with words that sounded like latin to me.

From the corner of my eye I saw something laying on the ground several steps ahead. I was about to check the last building on this side of the road anyway so I decided to check it out.
Walking closer I gazed at the light grey object on the ground and realised that it was actually a ripped apart animal.

It was small and missing some parts but the furry long tail pointed to a squirrel.
I looked around, trying to find the cause behind the small rodents death.
When I haven't seen anything, I got rather nervous. Whatever it was, it could still be around.

,,Tío! There's a dead squirrel here so something could be around" I called out towards Tío.
He was leaning on a windowsill and grabbing stuff from the same house. When he heard me he looked in my general direction and then around.

,,Okay, it could be that dog but stay on high alert!" He called back and looked around one more time before going back to work.

It took us some time to scavenge those houses and in the end we could only grab what we reached through the windows, but we did manage to get a map from the post office.
It didn't show a big area as we hoped, but it was still big enough that it is showing Slave Lake and Calling Lake with all the small stops between them.

I walked back towards him as it would get late when he was done with the buildings I already checked. I could help him take the clothes and other supplies out. He took out a coat at least.

It would be perfect for the cold, but it was the size of a ten year old child. He did manage to get some winter clothes that would fit us but it wouldn't hurt to get some more.
At first I was a little worried that we were literary breaking into other people houses, but now that I think about it, it will take some time to get rid of the fog.

Those people wouldn't mind if we take some things from their houses, right?

I stood next to Tío and watched as he took out a plastic box from the kitchen shelf with a shovel. He put the box in the sun just to be sure before opening it, as expected, that mist is there, but it is either salt or sugar inside.

A snarl startled both of us. I whipped around to see the mutt from before. It looked diffrent somehow, though, as it stood next to a yard.
White fur and the eyes appeared to be blind, yet it was looking directly at us.

,,Xiomara get behind me" Tío pushed me back and took a step forward, taking out his hunting knife.

The dog whimpered and then bit a fence it was standing next to, before snarling at us again. With hackles raised it took a step forward and dropped its head to the ground, trying to scratch itself.

Tío was constantly backing up and I did the same. It looked sick and a bite from it could cause an infection. The movement however caused the dog to charge at us. I froze as it ran full tilt at us.

There was a bang and the dog tripped and stayed laying still. I jumped as the loud sound echoed around the town and turned to Tío. He was still holding the knife but looking to his left.

A man with a handgun stood there. He was focused solely on the dead dog, still holding the weapon aimed at it.
When he finally looked at us I couldn't help but admire his light grey pupils and irises that matched his hair.

He wore black pants and a dark green coat. A simple cream colored wool scarf loosely tied around his neck.

He blinked a few times before lowering the gun and then shoving it in a leather holster on his side. He looked at the dog before coming closer to us.

,,Thank you" Tío lowered his knife as well and checked me before looking back at the man.

,,You're welcome" He nodded ,,Was observing you for some time and noticed that dog coming. Thought you had a gun yourself but apparently not"
He glanced at the hunting knife and at the dead animal.
,,That knife would help, but you would got bit for sure"

,,Thank you again" Tío visibly relaxed but was still on guard, never letting that guy out of his vision.

,,I'm Pedro" Tío introduced himself and then pointed at me ,,And this is Xiomara"

He nodded his head and looked around the small town.
,,Michael. Looks like you grabbed most of the supplies here"

,,There are some buildings we haven't checked yet, those that don't have broken windows. Besides we are happy to share, considering that you just saved our butts"

I stood slightly shaken up and silent as Tío and Michael made the deal. I looked over at the dead animal and noted the light gray fur. Something was amiss.

I walked over and crouched next to the corpse, not daring to touch it. The dog just got shot but there was no red blood, just white liquid, almost invisible on the fur. It was a stark contrast on the dark pavement.

,,Xio, what are you doing?"

I looked at Tío and then back at the dog.
,,You might want to see this"

He and Michael came towards and Tío crouched next to me while the other guy stood on the other side.

,,The blood is white" I pointed it out and Tío hummed before standing up.

,,Infected individuals can develop unpredictable traits" He slowly worded and patted my back ,,Let's get back to work. Dark clouds are coming so we might need to camp outside tonight"

Tío was holding back his explanation for some reason, maybe because of Michael. I didn't push for answers as I can ask another day, besides it seems like Tío figured something out.

Michael grabbed his bag and waved.
,,Well, I be on my way"

,,You're leaving?" I asked slightly sad. He was the first human we talked to since this mess started.

,,Yea, There's a place I need to go to." He turned and started

walking away ,,Good luck you two!"

,,Good luck to you too!" I called back and waved as he left.
I grabbed our stuff as we prepared to leave ourselves.

,,He was infected" Tío commented as he put on a jacket and his bag.
I had a hunch as his hair and eyes were the same color as the dogs.

,,He seemed normal, It's just that he looks blind" I remember his eyes. White pupils blended with the irises. If not for the little green color at the edge of the iris it would blend with his sclera.

I looked at the dog one last time and noted the eyes. White pupils and iris with a dark brown border separating it from the sclera.

We started our walk back but as Tío said, we won't make it to the tree house before the fog. He decided to sleep up in the trees today. In the cold.
We set up the hammocks we brought with us and ate a bag of chips.

Tío also tied some rope to a tarp and set it up above our hammocks. Now if it rained we wouldn't get drenched.

I climbed the tree with some difficulty and secured our bags before sliding to my hammock. Tío did the same and since there was still some light, he took out the map and wrote something on it.

It was a good time to ask him.
,,Why was the blood white?"

He was silent for a moment before he answered.
,,It's probably one of those strands that eat hemoglobin and melanin and produce their own variants"

,,Did that help you find out which variant it is?"

He grunted ,,No, there were many with the same symptoms. I would need a microscope and some machines. Blood samples from several animals and even then, what use would it have? Some strands can be killed using extremely low or hot temperatures and others need chemicals that aren't naturally formed. Some just expire"

It started dribbling and the small droplets of water hit the tarp. We were sleeping in several layers of clothing as the night will be definitively colder than day. I was surprised it wasn't snowing but yet gain it was early november.

,,Good night Tío" I relaxed and listened as the crickets started their nightly routine.

Tío grumbled a good night and started snoring shortly after.

Chapter 6

I yawned tiredly as I waited for the fish to take bait. It was over an hour and I caught nothing. Hopefully Tío had better luck with his bow.

He had to make every arrow himself and the only thing those could kill are small critters and birds, but they get the job done. I was very surprised when a wild rabbit attacked us.

If you could even call that an attack.
The white critter tried to bite and kick, but it just annoyed Tío too much and ended up in a stew.

I looked at the pure white snow on the ground and shivered when the cold wind hit me from behind.
It was hard to believe it was already November, but a whole month has passed since the start.

Day grew colder and shorter, and shorter days meant more fog. It was almost reaching the tree house now.

Well I was done waiting here for the bite, hopefully Tío was more lucky with his hunting. My bottom was frozen from sitting on the ground with only a thin blanket separating me and the cold ground.

I packed everything and went back, dreaming of the warm blanket and tea.

,,Xio!"

I stopped and looked in the direction of Tíos voice.

,,I'm here!" I shout back and walk in his general direction. It took me a solid minute to find him in all the snow and trees.
He was crouched next to a pile of snow or what looked like snow on the first glance.

,,Is that?" I crouched down next to the animal carcass ,,A wolf?"

The white fur blended so well with the snow it was difficult to see it from far away. Not to say that the blood was white as well and it was seeping out of its nose and mouth.

,,Broken ribs." Tío commented as he ran his hand over the carcass, and it had to be fresh since we've been here two days ago. ,,something killed it but didn't eat it"

,,Whatever it was, I hope it's far away now." I shiver from the cold. Standing up I notice a black bird strapped by its legs to Tíos bag.

,,Seems like you had more luck than me." I show him my empty bag.

He smiles and puffs his chest out ,,Of course. I'm the best when it comes to hunting."

Proud peacock.

We head back towards the tree house and a small thought pass through my head.

,,Why is the raven black? Was it not infected?" I eye the feathers and look up at the trees, trying to find more birds. Thinking about it, the birds seemed normal.

,,Only mammals can get infected so birds and lizards will be fine. Since rabies were used as the base virus the non-mammal species are immune to the bacteria in the fog."

,,Lucky." I whined and kicked some snow.

We reached the ladder and climbed up to the warm room. Tío started to prepare the bird and I made us some tea. He left the feathers for his makeshift arrows.

Since I have to wait for the water to boil, i wanted to check if Eva send something new and also text her my week.

I turned the phone on and instantly noticed that I only had 4% left. It lasted more than I thought it would. I started reading out loud what she texted.

,,Dad isn't doing so well. He's getting more restless and his eyes and hair changed white. He isn't the only one, about half of the people are the same. Some left as soon as their eyes changed but some stayed. I will text tommorow more since I don't have a lot of time right now."

I quickly wrote my summary of the week.
,,Hey, hope it's going to be okay. Here it's cold and it's hard to find food. Fish aren't biting and we found a dead wolf today. It seemed like something killed it. I hope that next winter we will get somewhere more comfortable than this. My phone is almost dead so I can write maybe one more time before it dies."

Tío threw out the guts of the bird through the window and sat down at the chair.
,,It's getting worse with him?"

,,Apparently," I nodded ,,His eyes and hair are white, just like the animals."

,,His restless behaviour may be a sign of complications that occurred in almost every strand. Mostly aggressive and erratic behaviour, but at the same time, some strands arent deadly." He thought out loud.

I really hope it's the deadly one that leaked, but with our luck?

I turn my phone off ,,She will text me tommorow. So what's for dinner?" I eye the ingredients he prepared.

,,Well, since we have only dried vegetables and so much meat I thought about soup."

Once we were done with eating, I cleaned the dishes and we played some games. Night came and the moon was hiding behind clouds. It seemed that today will be a dark night, well considering that the fog was slightly glowing, it wouldn't be so dark.

We settled in our hammocks and Tío was asleep in no time, while I took a while to fall asleep.

I woke up with a flinch. Did I imagine it or was there some sort of thud outside?
The hammock swayed as I got up and looked around the room. I expected to find Tío doing something or studying the fog like he usually did some nights.

He was sleeping soundly so I looked around the room once more. That's when I noticed how bright it was, and the sun wasn't out yet. The room was illuminated in a slight cyan light and that's when I noticed the teal mist slowly seeping through the floor.

Panicked I jump up and wake up Tío.
,,Tío wake up!" I shake his shoulder and keep the fog in the corner of my eye. There wasn't a lot of it, but with how it expanded, it didn't need a lot of time.

Tío grumbled ,,What?"
He was still half asleep.

,,The Fog got inside!"

He jumped up and looked around until he spotted the small cloud forming on the ground. It was a spot near the hatch in the ground.

He grabbed a plastic box and the sealant before running towards the leak. He covered the leak with the box and sealed it.
We watched as the box filled and glowed with the fog.

,,Grab the other sealant," He passed one to me ,,We're sealing the entire floor."

,,Do we have enough?" I asked and started sealing one corner and spreading it with a piece of paper between the cracks.

,,Hopefully."

We ended up sealing the floor the rest of the night, until the fog started to dissapear.
I eyed the sealed box and to my relief the fog inside was slowly fading.

,,What do we do now?" I asked and yawned, slightly relaxing.

Tío was silent for some time as he pondered, looking out of the window at the snowy scenery.
,,We will leave once snow melts. There's almost no sealant left and we planned to meet with Cooper and his family anyway. I will need to tell him that we will arrive earlier than planned."

I nodded and started the daily routine of making coffee and tea.
I stopped before I could even grab the old kettle from the table.
There it was again. That thud that woke me up.

,,Do you hear it?" I glanced over at Tío and he was already grabbing his bow and one makeshift arrow.
I walked over to the window and looked outside, scanning the surroundings.

Whatever it was, it had to blend with the snow, as I didn't see anything.

,,Whatever it was, is gone." Tío mumbled and lowered his weapon.

I wasn't so sure as I heard it at least an hour ago. It might be survivors.
I noticed a slight movement in the corner of my eye.

,,There, below us." I tried to look at the white antlers that suddenly dissapeared under the tree house.
Tío mush have seen it as he readied his bow.

,,I think it's a deer. Your bow will do nothing." I eyed the wooden arrow and he did the same.

,,Those were too big for a deer." He walked over to his bag and took out a red scarf. He slowly walked back and opened the window, before throwing the scarf outside.

The fallen red object must have got the interest of the infected animal and I almost gasped.

I never saw one alive and this one was massive. The animal walked slowly towards our diverse, revealing itself.

The moose still had its antlers, despise the cold season and they were as white as its pelt. The eyes were as white and blind looking as any other infected animal.

That bow wouldn't even scratch it, let alone injure or kill it.
It smelled the scarf and let out the loudest roar I ever heard. I stepped back from the window as it turned around and looked upwards at us.

The white moose blended so well with the snow it was hard to see it. Luckily the morning light casted a shadow where the animal stood.

I jumped when a barrel of a handgun appeared on my right and Tío fired. My ears were ringing with pain I never felt before. I swear it felt like my ears were bleeding, especially my right ear that was closer to the shot. I covered them with my hands.

I looked at Tío with wide eyes, he was talking or maybe shouting but I couldn't hear him, I looked at the moose only to see it on the ground. A bullet hole in its head and the white blood invisible in the snow.

Tío grabbed my arm and leading me towards the closest chair before removing my hands from my ears and checking them.
He was clearly saying something, but I couldnt hear anything, just loud ringing in my ears.

His eyebrows furrowed as he got up and ran his hands over his short black hair. Tío was visibly concerned. Was it that bad?

He walked over to his notebook before writing in it and giving it to me.

‚Sorry, It's my fault, I shouldn't have fired so close to you. It will take some time for your hearing to come back, I will go and skin the moose, if you need anything just shout'

I gave him a small nod and he walked over to me and gave me a hug, before going to the hatch and dissapearing below. I massaged my temples in hopes of reducing the coming headache and the

constant ringing wasn't helping.

I might as well sleep it off.
I walked over to the hammock and laid down. It took me a while to notice that I was actually shivering, so I grabbed one extra blanket. It wasn't cold inside but somehow it felt like it was freezing here.

I have no idea how long I was lying there or when I fell asleep, but I woke up when Tío patted my shoulder.
I slowly opened my eyes and looked at him, he was looking at me with his apologetic eyes. Surprising the ringing was quieter, but still present.

He said something and I could actually hear his voice, but it was so quiet I couldn't make out what he said.

,,Can you say it again but louder?" I asked.

,,How do you feel?" He repeated his question louder.
I could hear him, barely. That's a relief, I thought I might be deaf for a second.

,,Better, but I barely hear you." I looked around the room and noticed the that while I was asleep Tío chopped and dragged the meat inside. There was so much that we didn't need to hunt for the rest of the winter, if not longer.

,,Where did you get the gun?" I asked him. I don't remember seeing it anywhere since we got here.

,,The man from the city gave it to me. He gave me only a handful of bullets, so I decided to only use it in emergencies."

I nodded and massaged my temples, the headache was coming back.

,,Here." Tío walked over to his bag and came back with two identical pills ,,This should help with the pain."

I gladly took the medication and swallowed them instantly. Tío was about to give me a bottle of water but stopped once he noticed that the pills were gone already. I took it anyway.

Tío said something again but it sounded like a mumble.

,,What?" I still didn't hear properly ,,You have to talk louder. At the same time I hope I'm not screaming."

He shook his head
,,I said that we have enough meat to last us the whole winter and that when winter ends we should leave. Because of the accident this morning there's almost no sealant left."

I nodded and watched as he got up and took some of our salt supply and started to cover the meat with it. We had a lot of it, because of the loot runs we did.

A simple thought ran through my mind.
,,Do you think.. no that wouldn't make sense."

,,What?" He turned towards me.

,,I just, it's just a thought. What if that wolf we saw the other day was killed by that moose? But at the same time it wouldn't make sense."

Tío looked to be deep in his thoughs.
,,Actually that's a possibility"

,,But why would the infected animal kill other infected animals? Even zombies don't do that."

,,Zombies are a fictional thing Xio." He laughed and murmured something I couldn't make out.

,,So should be white animals that got infected by a glowing mist." I snapped back at him.
He stopped laughing and pursed his lips.

,,It's true that the rabies virus was used as one of the main components to make the RHRX virus and actually rabies is the closest thing we have to the zombie virus."
With that he turned around and spread some salt on the table.
,,But don't worry. I was looking over the testing reports and not a single one indicated that humans would start eating brains." He

joked and cut some strips from the meat.

I nodded to myself and watched as he prepared the meat and possibly was making some food.

Since I had some free time I decided to write what happened to Eva and then maybe make something to eat.

I turned my phone on and instantly noticed the one short message from her.

‚Dad got shot'

I stared at it for some time and then re-read it a few times.
Why? What? Is he okay?

„He got shot." I mumbled so quietly I wasn't sure I even said anything, but when Tío turned towards me I knew he heard me.

„Who?" He asked and walked closer „The moose?"

I shook my head and showed him the text, his expression instantly fell as he read the message.
He knew Eva's family. They were like a family to me, they cared for me when they found me and now, another person who cared about me was dead.

He sat down next to me and hugged me. I just sat there, looking at the ground.

„She just wrote that he was shot. He might be alive."

„No." I shook my head „If he was alive then she would write an entire essay about what happend." I sniffled.

He hugged me tightly.
„We will go to her." He said „You said she was somewhere in Crystal Falls, I know where that is"

I really wanted to see her and I really wanted to know what happened.
I looked at my phone, it will turn off any moment.

I started typing.
‚We're coming. When the snow melts we will head towards you.'
I sent the message and thought about sending another but the phone turned off. I need to find a way to charge it.

I will get to her.
I need to.

Chapter 7

It was March already and the weather was still freezing, quite the suprise for me, as I spent my last three winters south from here. We were prepared to head out and finally abandon this tree house, it wasn't bad for the most part.
It has insulation so it's warm inside, nice location and even furniture. If you can call one table and two chairs furniture that is. For me, it was not so good. I like to travel a lot and visit all the possible places, so staying here for the past six months was horrible.

I was packing the food and we had a lot of it. The dried meat from the moose lasted us through the entire winter and we still had some. Not that I enjoyed it to much, was way to salty for me.

Tío is packing the equipment and clothes. He doesn't want to drag excess weight, so we're not taking any winter clothes we got. Surprisingly he wants to take the moose hide he tanned, as if it didn't weight a ton.

My legs are aching, packing all of this is taking hours but tommorow we will be on our way. I will just take a small break and then continue with the work.

I stood up and stretched my legs. I look over to Tío as he was trying to fit a small axe in his bag, he might be taking too much stuff. Shaking my head I walk over to the table where a few things are spread. Mostly the map, books, our cups with cold tea and the journal.

It was closed but I could see something poking out from it, a note maybe? I looked closer and noticed that it was a photo.

,,Tío? Can I look at the photo in your journal?" I asked.

He waved his hand but I wasn't sure if he said something or if he just hummed. My right ear was barely working since the day he shot the gun. Ringing in my ears and partial deafness became my

new reality. The ringing definitely messed up my sleeping though.

,,What?" I asked with slightly raised voice to hint at my little inconvenience.

,,Sure! You can!" He shouted back.

Turning around I opened the journal on the pages the photo was tucked in.
It was a photo I've never seen before. Tío, my dad and a man I didn't recognise, a lot older than the two.
Tío and dad looked very similar, black hair and brown eyes but my dad had a moustache. Both of them were smiling and wearing hoodies and shorts while Tío had his younger brother in a head lock.
The older man on the other hand was frowning at the two, his green eyes piercing and menacing. He was standing behind them with a stylish cane and was wearing a tuxedo.

,,Who is the man on the photo?"

Tío glanced over and squinted his eyes before answering.
,,That's Doruk Azevedo. He's... not important." he turned back to his work.

I looked at the picture again and checked the back side but it was blank. Nothing more interesting I think.
I put the picture back and close the journal.
Right! I should pack at least one book. I read them already and I must say, poetry is not for me. I rather read about insects and grass.

I grab the book about plants and shove it to my bag before going back to packing the food. It might take several more hours before we're done.

After a good night sleep we packed our hammocks and waited for the Fog to dissapear in the morning sun. In the meantime I made us some coffee and we ate some granola bars, good thing that those don't spoil quickly.

As for the weather outside, it was still cold but the greenery is

starting to return to the forest. No more white snow that was hiding the infected animals. The squirrels were the biggest menace, always starting to bite and scratch the wooden frames at night and day.

The days are getting longer so there's less teal mist to worry about at night. Also Tío told me the plan of the little journey.

We go and collect Cooper and his family from a nearby town, before making our way towards Eva. It might take several days though as we're currently north of Edmonton and Eva is somewhere in Michigan.

Not to say that we have to go get Cooper first and he is supposed to be waiting somewhere in Slave Lake town, which is the opposite way. And we will probably spend two whole days to get there first.

,,So, once we reach that friend of yours, will we be making stops along the way or are we going straight to Eva?"

He put his backpack on his back and turned to the hatch.
,,We will see, I can't really force him to come with us. If they don't want to head that way we might travel together for a few days and then go our separate ways." He opened the hatch and looked down, making sure that it was safe to go out.

I jumped up from my seat and grabbed my own bag, ready to go. I left a note to fellow travellers that might stumble across this place, it just said that they are welcome to use this place but the hatch had to be sealed for the night, otherwise the fog might get inside.

I almost fell as I was climbing down the makeshift ladder but once my feet touched the ground I was ready for the adventure.
Tío took out a compass and handed it to me.

,,Could you find north?" He asked as he studied the map and the route he sketched on it.
I turned around in place until the big red arrow pointed at the N.

,,Found it!" I smiled and made a first step.

,,Okay, Find West now."

I stopped and looked at him, slightly confused. ,,Why?" I asked.

He gave me a cheeky grin ,,Because I might have confused the two."

How does somebody confuse North to West?
I turned slightly and the arrow now pointed at the W. I looked back at Tío but he just smiled and started walking.

,,You did that on purpose didn't you?!" I shouted and ran up to him, he started running away and I chased him.
He tired out way faster than me.

He slowed down after maybe a minute and bent over, catching his breath. I caught up to him and stopped.

,,Don't tell me you're tired already?" I smiled as he was breathing heavily.

He just gave me a soft glare ,,I have my age you know? And I worked in a lab, I didn't run around with the wind like you."

After he caught his breath we continued, making sure that nothing was lurking around.
I really wanted to know how Eva is doing. I took my phone just in case I find a way to charge it.

Tíos phone also died some time ago, he was able to communicate with his friend and send him the directions. But I got the idea of asking him to write to Eva after his phone ran out of energy.

After a long trek in the woods we made a small stop to eat and get some energy back. It wasn't that bad in terms of weather but the critters from the wild were slightly annoying.

It's not that mice, rabbits and squirrels were dangerous, they were just getting in the way. I almost stepped on one rat as it was trying to bite me and Tío actually got bit by one falling squirrel.

It was actually hilarious to watch. At first we were just walking and then out of nowhere, a squirrel fell from a tree, right at him.
I never heard him scream like that.
It managed to bite his finger as he was trying to get rid of it.

Tío stopped me several times, claiming he heard something. I for sure didn't.
Luckily nothing came for us today but it was getting late and who knows what the night holds.

,,Let's camp here." I jumped over a fallen log and pointed at five tall trees that were quite close to each other. They should be tall enough, to keep us away from the fog and animals. Unless a bear finds us, those fluffy killers will climb that tree in seconds.

Tío nodded and we started setting up a camp.
He tapped my shoulder to get my attention and said ,,I will make food, Can you climb up and hang the hammocks?"

I looked up the massive tree and blinked. I may have chosen this place but I have no idea how to climb them.

It took me almost an entire hour to hang both hammocks up. Most of the time was spent climbing and getting down but I think they are high enough.
We ate our dinner that resembled a watery soup with overly salted meat and almost no vegetables. He tried adding some fresh dandelions but it just wasn't a good idea.
It was almost sundown at this point so I decided to climb up and lay down with a book.
Tío did the same after putting out the fire, he took out some extra blankets and told me to do the same, as the night might be cold.

I did so and we went to sleep.
Luckily nothing disturbed our night but I did wake up several times because I was freezing. I ended up sleeping in my shoes for some extra protection from the early march night. I hope it will get warmer soon.

The next day was the same.
Wait until the fog dissapears, pack our stuff and walk.
We had to cross a river yesterday and it seems that we have to cross another one today. There was just a small problem with that.

,,How are we supposed to cross it?" I eyed the wide river. We could swim but it would be freezing and all of our clothes would be wet,

not to say that our food would get wet and we had flour in there.

He grumbled something before actually answering.
,,I messed up with the directions. We were supposed to go over it via a bridge but we ended up turning way to late. It's either that we continue walking and try to reach another bridge that is closer to town but we will end up on the opposite side or we go back and take our chances with the time."

I glanced over his shoulder at the map, and found both of the bridges. There's no way we are making it in time if we head back.
,,I rather not take chances. While we will end up on the other side, we can just camp the night out on one of the buildings and find them tommorow."

He nodded and we started our trek again. It didn't take us long to get there, maybe a little over an hour, now it was just a walk into the town and find a place to camp. It will probably start getting dark in two maybe three hours so we have time, for now.

We reached the town and I almost couldn't believe what I was seeing. Not a single house looked like a good camp spot. Those houses were small and almost all of them had pointy roofs.

,,This is going to be hard." I groaned as we turned to head towards the centre.
If it comes to this we might even try looking at the airport, it was small but the hangars should be tall enough.

I looked at each house as we passed them, even looking for signs of life. Sure there were some cans and other trash but that's to be expected.

,,Look." Tío pointed at one building in the distance. It was one of the small ones with pointy roofs.
,,Broken windows." He added.

That got my attention even more. We walked towards it and I tried to look inside but there wasn't much. Somebody clearly looted this house and that meant people. Hopefully the people were looking for.

,,Cooper!" Tío suddenly shouted on top of his lungs, slightly scaring me.
I glared at him.

,,Are you trying to invite every animal in hearing range to a party?" I growled lowly and looked around.

,,I'm trying to inform my friend that we arrived." He shot back.

I took a step forward and looked around before spinning back to him ,,And if we're here first? At least let's find a safe place to camp before trying to get attention of infected rats."

He opened his mouth but closed it right after, nodding and mumbling something. It was slightly irritating as I couldn't hear what he was mumbling but I ignored it and followed him.

We didn't walk for long as Tío stopped and raised his hand as if we were in military. He was listening in to our surrounds. He slowly took out the gun and I immediately stepped back. I don't want to be completely deaf.

I carefully looked around, even trying to look inside the buildings. It was completely quiet and the sun casted long shadows around us.

,,There." Tío pointed his gun at a approaching figure of a human. At least it wasn't an animal.

The figure was slowly walking in our direction, it was hard to see them as the sun was behind them.

,,Will ya lower the gun." a man spoke out and walked the rest of the way towards us. Tío must have recognised him as he instantly lowered the weapon.

,,Cooper. Long time no see old friend." He smiled at him and went for a hug.
Cooper looked unkept, torn pants, black hair that resembled a bird nest and a lot of bandages on his right arm. His eyes were the deepest shade of dark green i ever seen.
He was also pretty tall and slender.

He looked like a man I would see as a boss of a company in a soap opera.

Cooper half-heartedly returned the hug and without sparing us another glance he turned around ,,Yea, hurry ya butts before the fog comes." and with that he started walking.

I looked at Tío but he was already following behind the grumpy man. I looked around one more time before doing the same.

,,Where's your family Cooper? In the camp?" Tío started a conversation as he caught up to the other guy.
I don't know why but I don't really find that guy pleasing but maybe he just has a bad day, who knows.

,,Change in plans." Cooper said as he turned onto another street ,,They stayed at the fort, said that it's too dangerous."

,,So you're by yourself?" Tío asked as we stopped next to a tall building with a flat roof.

,,Yea, but it's better that way. Don't have to watch over them."

I looked at the building and couldn't help but smile slightly. Tax services, who knew that something connected to taxes could help us.

Cooper climbed a metal ladder onto the roof and Tío waved his hand for me to go first. I did so and upon reaching the top I saw one yellow tent and a small camp fire. Cooper sat down next to it and added some wood.

Tío reached the top and sat down as well.
,,Come on Xio, he doesn't bite."

He definitely looked like he could.
I sat down and awkwardly pursed my lips. Tío said that I met him before but I have no memory of that. Maybe I was just too young to remember?

,,So, where are they? In the same fort you were evacuated to?"

Cooper shook his head as he took out a bottle of water ,,Beats me, somewhere east from here most likely."

I looked at the guy with utter confusion. He doesn't even know where his family is? Wasn't he with them during winter?

,,What do you mean?" Tío asked and took out his water bottle before passing me mine.

,,Pedro, don't dig into it. Something happened and they decided to find shelter, that's it" He growled before adding ,,Do you have that journal?"

He shook his head with a grim expression.
,,No, left it in my house. I thought I grabbed it but it was my personal journal."

Cooper said something I couldn't hear as he looked at the fire. Then he looked at me and said something again. He was sitting on my right side and the fire wasn't really helping with it cracking.

,,You'll have to talk louder." I commented before opening my bottle and taking a sip.

His scowl grew deeper and he shot a glance at Tío who explained everything with a guilty expression.

This is going to be a tough journey.

Chapter 8

We met up with Cooper two days ago and I had a feeling that he doesn't like me. Maybe it's because I gave him a stupid nickname after he struggled an entire hour to crack open a coconut he got from a store, only to find out that it was rotten inside. Since then I began calling him Cocoguy.

And he started calling me brat or kid. For his defence my name is pretty hard to say and spell.

Tío is currently making breakfast, as Cocoguy was even worse at cooking than I was. But I have to praise myself, I am a rather good hunter, mostly because the prey isn't really running away.

It was still chilly but not freezing, better for us as we have to sleep outside. Currently I'm sitting at the edge of the roof, scanning the surroundings for any kind of threat.

The Fog was mostly gone and I'm ready to head out, finally. We will finally start heading east towards Crystal Falls and hopefully find the fort.
Cocoguy wasn't thrilled to hear our plan but what could he do? Stop us?

He can go his way if he wants but nothing will stop me from my destination. I will get to my friend no matter what.

,,Breakfast is ready!" Tío threw a cap at me, it landed on my leg. I turned and grabbed the cap with a grin and a plan.
Cocoguy and Tío were discussing something while eating, both of them facing the fire.

I sneak up behind Cocoguy and tapped on his right shoulder while I duck to the left. When he turned I quickly threw the cap on him and jumped next to Tío who was watching in amusement.

Cocoguy growled and ripped the cap of his head before glaring

daggers at me.
,,Pedro, keep this brat in check will ya."

I gave the most innocent look I could muster before looking away.
,,I didn't do anything, it was the wind."

,,Yea, sure, the wind. What's gonna be next? Gnomes?" He snorted and threw the cap into the fire.

,,What? Are you missing your left sock?" I joked and Tío started chuckling before giving me a plate with whatever he made.

I ate the food and cleaned the plastic plate with some water, before stretching.

,,So, are you done? Can we go already?" I asked and looked over at them, only to see them still eating. How slow can they be?

,,We'll be ready in ten minutes." Tío said as he shoved another spoonful in his mouth. ,,You can pack the bags if you're this inpatient."

,,What?" I asked, pretending to not hear him.

His eyebrows furrowed.
,,I said that you could-"

,,I heard you." I smiled happily ,,I was just messing around."
I grabbed the nearest bag and went over to the pile of stuff we had. Mostly blankets and food that Cocoguy gathered before we got here.

I could see Cocoguy scoff from the corner of my eye and he started saying something.
I didn't really care what he was talking about, all I cared about was leaving this place already.

In about five minutes I had everything packed and prepared to move. The hardest was to pack that tent. For some reason Cooper doesn't want to leave it, where is he planning to use it? We will mostly camp on trees so there is no need for it.

I waited for them near the ladder and when they finally came I slid down. I waited for them to climb down and point the direction. I had no idea where Crystal Falls or Michigan were but luckily I had two adults with me.

We started walking to the edge of the town, Cocoguy was leading, while me and Tío walked behind him.
Both of them were prepared for any kind of surprise attack. I on the other hand was scanning the treeline.
I noticed movement faster then them, probably because of my paranoid mind.

I really would hate to see a bear or another moose. I don't think wolves will be a problem if they ever attack, especially since animals tend to be attacking even each other.

We walked in the direction we came from. Over the bridge and back on the road.
We wanted to reach Smith tommorow, so we needed to walk over eight hours to get halfway.

The asphalt road stretched over the horizon but we turned right on a dirt road. I haven't noticed that it was a trailer park before and there were actually some parked here. The flat terrain was a blessing as we could see far to the distance, at the same time something or someone could see us from a great distance.

I decided to entertain myself by looking at all the plants that were growing. There wasn't much since the snow melted maybe two weeks ago.
I noticed some mushrooms or what looked like them... I think I saw them in my encyclopaedia.

,,What are those?" I pointed at the plant life that looked grey and blond honeycomb in bulbous shape.

Tío looked over but it was Cocoguy who answer.
,,Morels. Good find, we can cook them."
He went over and collected all of them.

I didn't really adore mushrooms. They tasted good but I hate the

texture when boiled. Slimy and all.

I jumped over to him and watched as he put the mushrooms in a cloth and in his bag.
,,Do you think we will find more?"

He stood up and actually gave me a small smile. ,,When you find one mushroom, you gonna find another."

We continued on our trip until the sun was setting. Somehow we forgot to eat lunch but that gave us more time to make more miles.

Besides it seems like today we will have mushroom stew. True to Cocoguys word, we found more. He started talking about all kind of fungi.

How to tell which ones are edible, their look alikes and even when and where they grow.
Later I learned from Tío that his expertise were fungi.

,,So, exactly how big are giant puffballs?" I asked as I dragged a massive branch over to the camp. It will provide enough firewood for the rest of today and tommorow morning. Let's count in the sticks and branches that Cocoguy collected.

,,It's big, as it name says. I found only one in the wild but I never really went foraging for them."

,,A mushroom scientist who didn't go mushroom hunting. Ironic."

He gave me a rather sour look.
,,I will let you know that there is no thing such as mushroom scientist. I'm a Mycologist and I didn't need to go collecting mushrooms, the lab provided them. On the other hand, I was mostly focused on molds."

I almost tripped over a branch but managed to catch my balance. We were almost at the camp, in fact I could smell the smoke already.
,,How are molds interesting?"

It was quite funny how open and passionate he was when we talked

about mold but ask him about his favourite colour and he is burying you six feet under with his glare.

,,They are microscopic fungi that can grow on plant or animal matter. Have you ever seen it under microscope? And there are so many species as well."

We reached the camp fire and I instantly dropped the branch. I was tired and hungry.

,,You're back already?" Tío was chopping the mushrooms on a rock with his knife. I hope he washed it before using it.

We sat down while he was making the food and they started discussing the route with the map, while I took out my book. Their conversation sounded more like an argument though.

,,If we use main roads we will get there faster." Tío growled and pointed at the map with his dirty knife.

Cooper said something and pointed with his finger at Edmonton, the closest, biggest city.
,,If we do that we will be seen by people you don't want to meet. Believe me."

,,Going around will take twice the time!"

,,But less danger!"

Like siblings fighting over a toy but what do I know? I never had a sibling.

,,Look." Cocoguy grunted. ,,Bigger cities had more population, some of which were left behind or stayed and those people do whatever is necessary to get supplies. Forts will try to make us join them, some of them don't take no for an answer. My route avoids those places and besides its not like I'm gonna settle in that fort with ya"

Tío massaged his forehead as if he had a headache. He stared at the map which was bigger than ours and had almost all of Canada and some small pieces of USA.

,,If I may?" I raised my hand slightly.
Both of them turned towards me and Tío gave me the go ahead with his head.

,,I don't think that Cocoguys plan is that bad. If the cities truly have survivors who are capable of anything for some supplies, we might want to avoid those places. I'm not too sure about the forts so I won't discuss that. Not to say bigger cities had bigger pet population as well."

Cocoguy, even if he didn't show it, look pleased but his smirk soon dissapeared.
,,Stop calling me Cocoguy you brat."
He turned towards Tío.
,,See Pedro? Even she thinks my route is better"

,,I didn't say it was better." I pointed out. ,,While your route is 'safer', it isn't the best option. We can always go with the route Tío picked but avoid the main road and go along the dirt roads."

Tío suddenly shook his head.
,,No, let's go with your plan." He turned to Cocoguy. ,,We will go with the safer option for now but make sure we will be able to loot for supplies. If we avoid every town we might run out."

,,You say it as if you didn't know me Pedro." Cocoguy waved his hand and started mapping the route.

Tío focused back on cooking and I enjoyed the silence. Not that it was truly silent as the whistling in my ears never stopped. I forgot what true silence is at this point. I miss it.

When the stew was done I decided to chow it down. It may seem like I was starving, and I was, but in reality I wanted to eat as quickly as possible to avoid thinking about the mushrooms in it. Finding them was fun, eating them, not so much.

,,So, what are we doing tommorow?" I asked as I cleaned my plate.

Cocoguy was the first to answer.
,,Walking."

It sounded almost like sarcasm.

I looked at him with a deadpan.
,,Here I thought you found a working plane so we could fly there but no, you had to destroy my fantasies with reality."

,,Life kid, get used to it."

Tío smiled and stood up, probably to climb the tree and get to his hammock.
,,If we're lucky, we will get to Smith tommorow and from there we will finish planning the route. For now, I advise that you go sleep."

With that he climbed up to his sleeping place. I packed my book and with my bag climbed up as well.
It was still too bright to fall asleep, so I stayed up and read. I'm sure I will have to find a new book though. Reading the same book over and over can get boring.

Cocoguy went to his hammock much later, almost before the dark. Unlike Tío, he doesn't snore that loudly. Luckily I picked a spot where Tío was on my right side, where I couldn't hear properly. The partial deafness had its perks.

Chapter 9

I climb over a fallen tree and stand on top, searching for any kind of mushrooms or plants that could be edible. If I find any, I can show them to Cocoguy and he will say if they are edible or not.
A little and useful game.

Both Tío and Cocoguy were walking on the dirt road, I could see them through the foliage but I doubted that they could see me. Every half an hour Tío would call out and I would come back.

From my ventage point on the tree I could see some mushroom but I knew those already. False Morels, not edible.

I jump down and look all around me but didn't see anything I recognised. I moved forward and keep my eyes on the ground as well as looking around.
Surprisingly most animals dissapeared.

I saw much more wildlife before the fog actually. Cocoguy says it's probably because their aggression, that they moved to 'more populated areas'. Like forts.

,,Xio!" Tíos voice rang out and I headed towards them. It didn't take me long as he wanted me to stay within earshot.

I came out of the woods and sprinted towards them, preparing my bag in the process.

,,There's a city not too far away from here." Cocoguy said as he grabbed the bag and started inspecting the mushrooms and greens. Mostly dandelions.

,,So? Are we going to loot it?" I asked and looked at the sky. It was still afternoon but I doubt that we can loot today.
Before we get there we will need to set camp and then go check the town.

,,Yeah, I was thinking that we could go and see what was left. So Cooper wants to go closer and see it from afar then set camp and go there tommorow morning." Tío explained as he started walking again.

,,There's just one problem." Cocoguy said. ,,There's also a fort nearby if I remember correctly."

I never seen a fort.

He continued. ,,Which means that the city may be looted clean."

My bag was returned with a nod of approval and we followed the road until we saw a split.

Three new directions to choose from. Good thing that I wasn't holding the map.

,,Cold Lake was it?" Tío asked and walked to the middle of the road. ,,Straight ahead."

,,Where is the fort? In the city?" I asked and looked for any human activity.

,,No. Forts were built either around small towns or next to major city's or in parks. Nothing impressive really."

,,C'mon Cooper! It's impressive that they were build in half a day!" Tío grinned and jabbed him with his elbow.

,,A wall of steel plates welded together around a town. Yeah, impressive." He said with the most unimpressed face I ever seen him made.

,,Definitely more impressive than your chairs." I grinned.

He stopped and turned towards me. ,,What did you say?" His eyes burned with challenge.

He was in luck because I will give him a challenge.

I smiled at him. ,,You know, the chairs in the tree house? Those

were your work right?" I dramatically massage my back. ,,Really bad quality I must say. The first time I sat down I thought that it was a rocking chair."

His eyebrows furrowed and his face almost got red. Tío cleared his throat.
,,Cooper." He pointed ahead ,,Let's go."

Cocoguy was not even looking, his eyes were solely on me and burning with murder.

,,Those chairs were high quality. I. Made. Them." He pointed at himself and turned around stomping away.

,,Wobbly and a lot of splinters." I grinned.

He turned around and charged straight at me.
I ran ahead and laughed as I passed Tío.

It wasn't the first time I angered that guy. Besides he wouldn't do anything, if he catches me he would usually start boasting how incredible he was.

I stopped when I saw the first building come into view. A small house and a front yard. Turning around I notice that Tío and Cooper are walking next to each other talking about something. I didn't even notice when he stopped chasing me.

I look around for any tall building or good rooftop but for now there are only the pointy roofs.

,,Xio! Wait for us!" One of them yelled.
It's not like I wanted to go inside alone.

There might be problems with camping tonight. All of the houses have pointy roofs and the trees were thin. Unless we find something deeper in the city we might be in a little bit of trouble.

When they finally reached me I pointed out the inconvenience. I know that Tío wanted to camp outside the town but we have no choice. The sun will set in a couple of hours.

We walk inside the town and search for a good flat rooftop. To my disbelief all the houses roofs were pointy. Ever since the fog came I noticed things I didn't see or just ignored before.

It took us almost one hour until Cocoguy finally pointed at a flat roof. It looked like a three story tall, peach coloured hotel. What looked like a big helper was that there were staircases outside of the building.

On each floor of the building were white doors and windows. Definitely a hotel.

There was no staircase directly to the roof but we should be able to climb rest of the way up.

We got as high as the staircase allowed us and then Cooper helped Tío climb up.

,,C'mon, pull yourself up!" Cooper groaned as he tried to stand upright with Tío standing on his shoulders. ,,You weight a ton!"

,,I do not!" Tío growled and pulled himself up. ,,You're just not as strong as you think you are."

They started spitting sarcasm at each other, again. Meanwhile I just stand here watching it unfold. Might as well make sure that they aren't attracting too much attention.

I could see some rats scurrying next to the cars below us but I doubt those will be a problem.

I look at the town with curiosity, as we will loot tommorow and many of the buildings have broken windows. Some of them even have broken down doors.

Looks like people from the fort were brave enough to enter or an infected person was here.
I just hope that we will find something useful.

I noticed something move behind a building so I focus my eyes directly at the spot.
It takes a while for the white haired person to look around a corner

at us again.

He isn't far away so I study him more carefully.
Tall and lean, white hair and eyes, looks to be in his late 20's.
However he looks rather cautious and tense.

Would it be bad if I call out? He might be studying where we camp to steal or to kill for all I know.

,,What are you waiting for!" Cooper shouts and grabs my shoulder spinning me around. ,,You saw something or what."

,,Yeah." I turn back around and wave at the man. ,,Him."

Might as well let him know that I saw him. If he is a thief, he could reconsider. If he is just a survivor he could join us for a chat.

After the infected man saved us from that dog I doubt they could be dangerous like the animals are.

The man stares for a while and then slightly lifts his hand and waves shyly.
I smile.

Looks like he isn't dangerous.

,,Hey man, wanna join us?" Tío shouts from the rooftop.
Cooper spins around.
,,Not a chance!" He whisper-yells.

I turn and frown at him.
,,If he wants to, he can. And if you don't like it Cocoguy, go to a corner."

He glares at me and then at the man who doesn't look surprised.

He is close enough that he might have heard what Cooper said. I hope he didn't, more company will be always better.

He shook his head and gave us an awkward smile. He turned around and walked away.

,,Inconsiderate donkey." I murmur and head towards the wall.
Tío grabs my hand and pulls me up.

,,How did you call me?" Cooper stalks towards the wall and Tío helps him up as well.

,,You heard me."

,,Next time try better insults." He scoffs and takes his bag off.

I frown slightly.
,,I was raised in a polite family, unlike you Cocoguy."

He starts murmuring and sits down, taking his tent and starting to pitch it.
,,I have my reasons for not trusting infected people. One second you think they're fine and the next they're going for your neck."

,,And I have a reason to trust them. One of them saved us! They are human, just like us."

Tío stayed silent and took out our blankets as well as some dried fruit. He was trying his best to not engage in an argument.

,,Not all of em." Cooper growled and got up, pulling a string.
The tent lifted on one side so he walked around and pulls the other string. His tent was pitched and ready to use.

,,You won't know how they act if you don't give them a chance."

,,Okay!" Tío suddenly stood up and threw a bag of dried fruit at me.
,,Everyone has their own experiences. Some are good and some are bad. Now lets drop that discussion and focus on the task.
Tommorow we have to loot and since the building are broken into and there aren't many animals, the fort must have been here. What are your ideas?"

He clearly didn't want the fight to continue. His relationship with Cooper was on brotherly level, so even if they argued they would eventually come to terms.
Mine relationship with him was like an old grumpy dude and a kid with too much energy.

Our argument were mostly caused by me. Let's just say that I liked to test his limits.

,,Let's just grab what we can and leave." Cooper signed deeply and grabbed some water.
,,If we don't find much we can stop at the next small village and camp for some days. Hunt and smoke the meat, boil water."

The plan sounded good, even if I didn't want to stop for a long period of time.
,,How about we do it here? The fort is close, and you said that animals will be going to it like flies to light."

He shook his head.
,,Forts will be hunting those. They have more mouths to feed, besides I rather avoid bears and wolves. Several rabbits will last us some time and if we find pheasants or other birds we will balance our diet."

Tío and Cooper stay up longer, discussing and talking about their old work. I barely keep attention unless they ask for my opinion. By the time they head to sleep, the fog is surrounding the entire town.

The next day we decided what par of the town to loot and that we will meet up at the camp. Cooper went his own way and me and Tio went together.

Unfortunately all the houses seem to be looted. Even the shops were broken into.

,,We can always trade?" I ask.
I doubt Cooper will want to trade with anyone. He acted like a flat out cactus.

,,We'll see wha Cooper found and decide after that."

We made our way back with slow walk. There was no hurry or big threat so we could relax a little. We did found one shoe though. Nice brown leather shoe.
I noticed something move inside a building some distance away.

My gaze focused on the house as i stopped. Tio stood still and tried

to find what i saw.
,,What is it?"

,,Something moved in the house over there."

We stood there watching the house in deadly silence, ready to bolt to safety if neeeded.
For a second i thought that it could be Cooper but he isnt stupid to enter a building recklessly and whatever it was, it moved rather quickly inside.

It took a while for the shadow in the building to look outside and spot us, also allowing us to see him. The guy from yesterday.

I instanly relaxed and smiled, waving at him. Tio also relaxed and took a deep breath with a shake of his head.

The young man flinched when he saw us but also seem rather relaxed when he realised who we were. He nodded his head and turned back to his own search. He was completly umbothered by the fog as he opened the shelves in a room.

Since he scknowledged us but decided to keep distance we began walking back to our camp. Luckily he avoided Cooper.

Tío looked in his direction one more time and murmured. ,,There is a second one."

I turned around and true to his word there was a second man. he looked at us from the window upstairs with blank expression. He looked much older that the first guy, yet his hair and eyes matched. White like snow.

It's good that they aren't alone. I wouln't want to be alone in times like these.
I waved my hand at him, he however didn't.

His face was blank the entire time, like he was trying to figure us out.
Good luck with that. Eva always says that I'm random.

I decided to leave a small gift and since we were good on weapons I

decided to leave my hunting knife where he could see it. I never used it and had a pocket knife that was far more useful to me than this one. Even if something attacked me i wouldn't know how to use a hunting knife, besides Tio and Cooper have hunting knives as well.

Tio didn't comment and waited for me patiently. I made sure that the man was watching when i left the knife and walked back towards our camp with a small smile.
On my travels many people helpred me. I had a empty water bottle? Someone always filled it for me or gave me a unopened bottle. flat on a bike? Nice man fixed it and showed me how to do it myself if it happend again. The bike was stolen a though so i never had to fix a flat myself.
It felt nice to help.

We made it back to camp and colected some wood or other flammable stuff on the way. Cooper still wasn't here so maybe he had more luck than us. this town was for sure cleaned out so his plan might be the best option for now. Unless we visit another town and it wont be looted but after almost six months later the other people were leaving the fort and looking for supplies.

to tell the truth i wouln't mind joining a fort, seemed like a safe place where not a single person had to worry about the fog. Why Cooper left?
Thruthfully I just think that he is wierd.

He came back later with one crow but he also didnt have luck when it came to looting. We will head south-east tommorow to get on the other side of the lake. It would be nice to go fishing and apparently he was planning to do so.

Chapter 10

I stare at the blue sign with a smirk.
,,I told you that if we follow this road, we will eventually find a town."

Both adults behind me weren't as cheery as me unfortunately. We were running low on luck and food.

All three of us were sick of meat and flatbread and infected animals are the only easy source of food for now.

It is May but it's still hard to find wild vegetables and not all edible greens taste good. Also, a lot of towns and small villages were looted clean.
What people from the forts didn't get the infected got.

And the sleeping situation wasn't good for the past couple of days as well. The more we head south the less tall pines we see.
Currently I can't see any trees at all.

We were lucky that we found a farmhouse yesterday. If not for that house roof, we would be infected.

,,Macklin." Cooper said as he scratched his slowly growing facial hair. He refused to shave it with a knife, like Tío did. ,,Never heard of it."

,,Me neither but let's go. The sun will set at any time." Tío murmured and started walking.

We walked towards the town, and I already saw a gas station that can be our camp tonight.
Cooper must have thought of it as well as he approached the building and walked around it.

,,Looks good." He said and climbed the ladder at the side of the station.

Tío motioned for me to go with his hand.

I climbed the ladder and stood up on the roof, enjoying the break in our trek across the country. Tío climbs up after me and stretches, while Cooper throws his bag to the floor.

,,I will go and try to get anything flammable. You can set the camp." Cooper walked over to the ladder but stopped right before climbing down.

Tío whipped around in his direction and stared into the distance. His eyebrows furrowed in a worry as he scanned the horizon.

Cooper was looking out into the distance as well. His face scrunched up and his posture rigid.
I tried to look at whatever they noticed that I didn't.

I could only see some birds flying in the distance and a slowly setting sun. It wasn't touching the horizon yet, but it would in a half an hour or so.

,,Did you hear that?" Tío slowly muttered.

Cooper hissed an answer.
,,Gunshots."

I blinked and pondered if it was a joke they planned along the way.
,,Gunshots are loud. I didn't hear anything and I'm not that deaf."

Cooper stepped away from the ladder and turned towards me.
,,It was far away but no fire today just in case. It might have been a hunter, a fort member or a bandit, who knows."

The seriousness in his voice was too real to be a joke. Unless he's a really good actor.

Tío nodded and let his bag slide down to the ground.
,,We shouldn't risk it. Tomorrow let's loot along the way and leave the next day."

I watched as they stressed and planned, clearly wanting to avoid any interactions with anyone. Maybe I was just a little bit too

relaxed about the whole situation, but I don't really think that everyone we meet is a mass murderer, unlike those two.
I was used to travelling and meeting all sorts of people. From nice elderly people to former drug addicts and criminals.

There were a few situations where I met not so friendly people, but I always got away.

,,Hey Cocoguy, relax a bit. Maybe someone was defending themselves from an animal."

He turned towards me with a glare.
,,We're not risking it." He growled and went back to unfolding his tent.
Someone is in a bad mood apparently.

The night came quickly and went smoothly. No gunshots or animals, even though the roof was not the ideal bed.
Waking up sore was not something I enjoyed.

We packed our stuff early and headed out when sun was fully visible, and the fog was nowhere to see.
We walk around the town and look for any building that wasn't looted yet.

It seems that more and more people were looting as almost all buildings had broken windows.

Is it possible that people are leaving forts or that the forts are sending groups?

Tío stops and sighs in defeat.
,,No use looking. There's probably nothing left behind."

Cooper grunted but nodded.
,,What others didn't reach the infected took."

I thought the same thing. Small and remote places could still have something but not for much longer.
I have no idea how Cooper wants to survive out here since he doesn't want to settle in a fort.

,,Then maybe next city? We can catch fish and look for mushrooms or other greens, hunt something. I still have some flour in my bag, so we can make bread and water from rivers or ponds." I thought out loud.

Both didn't look exactly thrilled by my idea but in the end, is there anything else we can do? They don't want to trade, and every building is probably picked clean.

,,Okay, but if this continues, I will trade." Tío commented while looking at Cooper who scowled in return.

,,Let's just go." Cooper took out a compass from his pocket. ,,We can exit the town and then shortcut through the fields."

,,And if we stumble across a river?"

,,We swim."

We looked for the nearest exit. I did look around for any building that wasn't looted but I doubt there was anything. Maybe a big mall would be stocked or at least have something. Big malls and storages didn't have windows and were full of the mist, that would deter people. I hadn't seen many infected people, but we do stay away from forts and big cities.

We walked around the houses, one of them had a nice looking brown, wooden fence. It looked new-ish and was a stark contrast to the slightly overgrown yard and broken windows of the house.

Tío lifted his arm, stopping us. He slowly took a step backwards and crouched down behind a wooden fence.

I heard a faint laughter and bickering, but it was so quiet I couldn't make out any words.

Cooper and I followed his actions and waited as we didn't see behind the fence.

Cooper crept closer to Tío and looked over his shoulder. Tío tried to push him back but Cooper didn't budge.
I looked for any holes in the fence but whoever made it done a good

job.

I tried to peek over it. I stood slightly and looked over, trying my best to stay hidden.
Five people. Four with guns and one on the ground.
The four armed people were laughing and pointing their weapons at the poor woman on the ground.

Her white hair and dirty clothes were covered in that white blood that every infected individual had.
She was trying to stand up, but she was clearly in pain.

One armed woman said something, and the rest started laughing again. I think there's only one woman from the armed group. Two were definitely male but the last was backwards to me.

Short, lean and medium length light brown hair, wearing military clothes and a black vest.
The sight became even more sickening when one of the men kicked the infected woman in the ribs.

I hid and looked at the two. We can't just sit here.

I whispered so quietly I couldn't hear myself. ,,We have to do something."

Tío backed up and furrowed his eyes in though, he was about to say something but Cooper cut him off.

,,No." He whispered. ,,There's four of 'em and they have guns. We have only one with only three bullets left. There can be more in the city."

,,But we can't just leave." Tío bit back.

,,What do you want to do then? Ask them nicely to leave?"

I jumped when a booming sound of a gunshot rang out. All of us peeked out only to see the woman unmoving and the armed woman pointing her weapon at her.

Shivers ran down my spine as I backed up and crouched to stay

hidden.
Now I just wanted to leave.

Tío backed up and pointed behind me and whispered. ,,Go."

Cooper started backing away and grabbed my hand, pulling me away. I blinked away the shock of witnessing a murder and started following them.

We will have to find another exit. Or maybe even hide somewhere. There weren't many trees around.

We walked in complete silence until we reached the edge of the town. A big parking lot and two white buildings.
To my right I saw dense shrubs.

,,Let's get out of here." Cooper started walking as fast as he could.

,,Cooper." Tío grabbed his arm. ,,Night will fall before we reach any spot for camp. It might be better to camp here one more night and leave as soon as the sun is out."

,,And risk those people finding us?!" Cooper smacked his hand away.

,,It's either getting infected or risking one night!" Tío said and looked at me for a second.

I was nervous, scared even but I trusted them to find the best answer. I knew how to take care of myself, but I never had to run from people with guns.

,,We can't risk it." Cooper growled, unfolding his map. ,,I had a run in with a group like that before. They kill as a way of revenge."

He pointed at the next nearest town south of here. ,,They shoot first and ask questions later."

,,There's a farmhouse down this road." Tío pointed out. ,,Might get there before the sunset."

,,Okay." I pointed at the map. ,,Let's get there and make camp, then

the first thing in the morning get away as far as we can."

I never liked to give my opinion to others, it always felt like ordering around but right now we need to move.
Both of them nodded and we headed out.

We didn't even make ten steps as we heard a voice rang out.

,,Hey!"

I tensed and turned around my head, ready to run. Tío and Cooper were ready to flee as well. Cooper even moved his hand to grab his gun that was tucked in his pocket.

It was the armed group, grinning they walked slowly towards us.
,,You guys need help?" One of the men asked.
The woman smiled sweetly as if she hadn't just killed a human minutes ago.

,,No, thanks." Tío answered. ,,We heard a gunshot so we're making ourselves scarce."

The woman answered this time.
,,The gunshot was us. We had a run in with an infected."
Her calm and overly relaxed voice sent a shiver down my spine.

I wanted to run, now.

,,Have you seen any infected by the way?" Another man asked, his gun, maybe a rifle, was resting on his shoulder.

,,No, not recently." Cooper murmured. ,,We have to go now."

He motioned to me to start going, I gladly obliged.

,,Why in a rush friends? We just wanna talk."

I noticed how their arms rested on the guns, definitely loaded and ready to use.
I noticed how Tío looked at me and at the shrubs next to us. Cooper noticed as well.

In a matter of seconds Tío grabbed my arm and bolted towards the dense bushes. Cooper was right behind us and the armed group yelled and shouted.

Gunshots soon followed but the amount of overgrown and tall greenery and dead plants slowed them down.
Unfortunately it slowed us down as well.

I bit back the pain of the branches scratching. I had a feeling that some bullets went flying right next to me.

I tripped over some roots but quickly got up. Another gunshot rang out and I could feel my adrenaline spike.
Suddenly someone grabbed me and tackled me to the ground.

A hand muffled my scream, and their other hand was holding my hands in place.

,,Shhh, be quiet." Coopers voice said behind me.
He dragged us closer to some bushes and tried to hide in them.

My heart was racing, and my breathing was out of control.
I could still hear some gunshots but no attackers.

,,They didn't follow that deep, only shooting blindly."

I nodded still trying to calm myself. I noticed something in my peripheral vision and pointed to the teal fog in the dark place under some bushes.

Cooper let go of me.
,,I see it. Let's wait here for a second."

I looked around and jumped when one of the bullets hit a tree somewhere close.
,,Where's Tío?" I looked around once more, panicked.

,,I saw him run a little further. Once they stop shooting, we will look for him."

I didn't want to wait.
I jumped to my feet, but Cooper was quick to grab my arm and pull

me down.

,,Are you trying to get killed?!" He growled.

I shook my head.
,,But what if-"

,,No." He cut me off. ,,I know Pedro. That guy is smart, he wouldn't get shot."

He may know him as a friend, but does he know him as well as I do?

,,But do you know Tío Pedro? You know him from work and as a friend. I know him as my Tío. He is smart but he also panics a lot. Now let me go!" I whisper-yelled and tried to stand up again.

He didn't let me though.
His silence was making me angry, why doesn't he understand!

,,Listen." He said and looked in the direction we came from.

I listened and looked as well. I can't hear any footsteps but yet again I don't have the best hearing.

,,I don't hear anything."

,,Exactly. They stopped shooting."

He was right, they stopped shooting. It was extremely quiet, not even a bird chirped.

,,What if they started following?" I asked and tried to look for any movement.

,,Doubt it. They already wasted bullets and made enough noise that any animal in the area will come. And it's getting late now. Let's go."

He got up and I quickly followed, I wanted to find Tío and get out of here as fast as possible.
We walked fast but didn't talk, in fear of the group actually

following us.

I walked and tried to avoid tripping or any sharp branches, I already have some cuts and bruises.
I also made sure to avoid any dark shadows where the fog hid.
I barely saw fog hidden like this, as the woods we walked through before weren't this dense.

,,I see him." Cooper suddenly fastened his pace.
I looked where he was going and true to his word, Tío was there.
Slumped behind a tree and breathing heavily.

,,Tío!" I ran towards him and tripped over a shrub.
I ran ahead of Cooper and reached Tío first.

,,Tío! Are you okay?!" Panicked I looked over his face.
He looked in pain. Why does he look in pain?!

,,Tío?"

Cooper crouched down next to him and lifted his hand, that was resting on his stomach.

Blood. The red blood stained his shirt.
My hands trembled as I stared at the wound.

I snapped back to reality and quickly threw my backpack to the ground. Looking for anything to stop the bleeding with.

,,Just a small cut, nothing to worry about." Tío said slowly, his voice strained with pain.

,,It's not a small cut Pedro" Cooper took off his bag and took out a shirt from it. Pressing it to his abdomen.
,,Hold it here."

I still tried to find anything useful in my bag. There has to be something!

,,Hey! Brat! I said hold it here!"

I jumped at his loud voice and did as he told me.

I was shaking and could almost feel my heart beating like a drum.

Cooper looked through his bag, his eyes narrowed each second.
,,Is there an exit hole?"

,,I don't know." He hissed. He looked pale, too pale. ,,Didn't even notice that I got shot until I looked down."

Cooper growled something and grabbed Tíos arm. ,,We can't stay here. We need to find shelter before night comes."

He lifted Tío up and he groaned in pain. I tried my best to keep the bloody shirt on the wound.
,,Rip the shirt and tie it around his waist. Then grab the bags." Cooper ordered.

I tried to rip the shirt but to no avail, so I took out Tíos knife and cut it instead. Tying it around his wound, I noticed that he was bleeding from the back as well.

I shakily grabbed the bags and went to them, to support Tío from his other side.
We walked slowly and tried to avoid any sharp branches or roots poking out.

Tío was stumbling more and more each minute, so my hope spiked when I saw a building.

Only a field of overgrown greens was between us and the shelter.

The farmhouse and a barn. The house had a pointy roof, but the barn had a curved one with flat top.
Now we need to get Tío up there and patch him up.

Cooper left me with Tío. I helped him sit down and rest against a tree.
He was short of breath and sweating.

,,Tío are you feeling okay? Do you need water?"

He shook his head and smiled slightly.
He clearly was in a lot of pain.

,,It's gonna be alright, you will be alright." I tried to comfort him, but it felt like I tried to comfort myself.

Cooper came back with a big ladder.
,,Do you think you will be able to climb up yourself?"

I glanced how high it was. If he wasn't wounded, he would be there in seconds but now?

,,I can try?" He looked tired.

Cooper also noticed and shook his head.
,,I can carry you up, but it will hurt a lot."

Tío nodded his head.
,,Better than trying and falling." He said and chuckled but quickly stopped. Gritting his teeth in pain.

Cooper grabbed his arm and helped him stand up.
,,Go and hold the ladder."

I grabbed the long ladder and dragged it towards the barn, propping it against the wall.

Cooper slowly made his way here with Tío. When they reached the ladder, Cooper lifted Tío over his shoulder and began climbing.

Tío looked in pain, gritting his teeth and grunting every time Cooper took a step.
I held the ladder until they reached the top, then I grabbed the bags and climbed up myself. The ladder felt unstable.

When I got on top I dragged the ladder up as well, just in case.
Tío was lying down and Cooper was cleaning the wound on his stomach.

,,This is the exit hole so it's more severe." He grabbed a water bottle and one clean shirt from Tíos bag. He cleaned the wound and tied the new, clean shirt.

The old one was dark red, soaked with blood.
I sat down next to him and grabbed his hand.

,,Don't worry Tío, I'm here."

,,There's nothing else I can do. We have nothing else. Not even disinfection."
Cooper sighed, clearly upset.
,,The bleeding slowed down but if it doesn't stop-"

,,Don't." I sniffled. ,,just don't."
Suddenly I felt the tears in my eyes. I couldn't hold them back any longer, I tried my best to wipe them all off.

,,Xio, don't cry." Tío whispered and squeezed my hand. I looked at his hand holding mine, crimson blood covered half of my sleeve, my clothes had several spots of the same red stains. There's so much blood, why is there so much blood on my hands?

Why is there so much blood? We stopped the bleeding, didn't we?!

,,You can't leave me! Tío Pedro, please." I knew that begging won't change anything, but I can't lose him. He is my Tío. My second father figure. My safe haven.

I cried and held his hand, not knowing what will happen next. So many questions ran through my mind, and I didn't like the answers to them.

He was pale, sweating and weak. His hold on my hand was loosening every moment we sat there.
Cooper was quiet and sat next to us, observing the stars that slowly showed up.

I rested my forehead on Tíos chest.
I haven't even noticed when the sun set and the fog rolled in. I didn't care about that anyway, right now I only cared about Tío.

My sobbing was a stark contrast to the night sounds. Crickets, gentle wind swaying the leaves, an owl sometimes hooted in the distance and here I was, unable to stop my heart from tearing apart.

,,Hey." Cooper gently whispered. It was the first time I heard him using such a tone.
,,Kid, He is at rest now."

I shook my head and tightened my hold on his hand.
He is not gone. I'm not ready to say goodbye yet.

A hand rested on my back as Cooper patted me.
,,I'm sorry."

I watched the disrupted dirt and put down flowers that I found earlier today.
Some wildflowers and grass tied together with a fishing line. Cooper brought back a big rock and put it on top of the grave.

When he was done setting the stone down, he stood next to me in silence. The only difference was that he wasn't crying.
His face was empty of any emotion as he stared at the grave he himself had to dig up.
I couldn't even sleep last night, I stayed by my Tíos side until Cooper buried him and here I am. Still not wanting to leave him.

,,We should go, that group is probably still around."

I didn't answer.
I had nothing to answer.
I wanted to stay here.

,,Kid, Let's go."

Chapter 11

The atmosphere between Cooper and me changed a lot during those two days. The usual bantering and arguing was swapped with silence.
It's probably because I stopped talking like I used to do.

,,Look." Cooper stopped and crouched down next to a pink-ish flowers.
,,Wild potatoes, also called Eskimo potato. Grows in Canada and Alaska."

He started digging for the small roots and pulled some out after a while of struggle.
,,Bitter in taste but very nutritious. We can make potatoes with mushrooms that we found earlier."

I nodded and helped him with the small potatoes. I also tried to memorise the look of the plant for the future. I know of a person who would be ecstatic at the sight of potatoes. He loved anything if it had potatoes in it. If he was here he would had his big grin and start telling us about all the possible dishes we could make.

,,Can you carry them?"

,,Yeah." I shrugged my bag off and packed the small roots.

Cooper grumbled something under his breath and continued walking.
,,We have enough mushrooms that we can dry some, this way we can preserve them for longer. Later at camp I can show you how to dry them with a string."

I hummed and almost tripped over a stone on the dirt road. It was slightly overgrown since nobody used it frequently or recently.

,,It seems like it will rain today so we can set up camp earlier, just in case."

Cooper was unusually chatty since that day.
He did talk a lot with Tío but with me it was just explaining some plant related stuff or arguing.
It seemed like he was trying too hard to make conversation with me.

I looked up and the grey clouds that were heavy with rain.
,,Seems so. There's a tarp in Tíos b-"
I cut myself off.
Right. He is gone.
Cooper was carrying that bag now.

,,Yeah, I know. Let's find good trees to hang the hammocks and then cook some food."

We looked for tall trees that were close to each other.
Cooper veered inside the woods and I followed until we reached some tall pines.
I could still see the path through the trees, but we were hidden enough that if somebody travelled here, they would miss us.

I grabbed the hammocks and climbed up the pines, sometimes having to break some branches.
When the hammocks were tied, I grabbed the tarp and climbed up again to make a makeshift shelter from rain.

Cooper in the meantime gathered wood, made fire and started cooking.
He must have found a stream nearby as he was also boiling some water.

He gave me a plate of the cooked potatoes and brown mush that barely resembled the mushrooms we gathered.
I took a bite of the potatoes and even when they were unsalted and slightly bitter, they were delicious. The mushrooms on the other hand could use some salt and more cleaning, the earthly flavour wasn't overpowering, but it still gave an unpleasant after-taste.

,,So, how is it? I don't usually cook."

,,It's okay." I decided to leave the comments to myself. I had no idea

how to cook so I had no right in telling others how to do it.

,,Glad to hear it." He grabbed a plate of his own and took a mouthful. He stopped chewing and looked at me with annoyance.

We ate in silence and once we were done, cleaned our plates. He refilled our bottles with the boiled water. It was getting darker and I noticed the fog slowly brightening in the darker spots.

,,We should go to sleep." I slowly got up and climbed the tree, getting to my hammock and laying down.

I watched down below as Cooper put out the fire and climbed up himself.
,,Good night kid." He yawned and rolled over, his back facing me.

I mumbled my own good night and slowly drifted out.

Every day is starting to feel like a routine. I hate routines.
Living every day like it was repeated, it is not for me or at least I never had to experience that lifestyle for long.

I lived how I wanted and worked where I could. Living in cheap motels or with Eva, visiting a certain overgrown house whenever I was close by.

Cooper was already below, aggressively mumbling something about mud or something.
With a groan I sat up, it was cold this morning. My feet were somehow wet, along with half of the hammock.
I must have set the tarp wrongly.

,,You up kid? I made breakfast." Cooper shouted from below then quickly added ,, If you can call it that."

I grabbed my bag and looked for a change of clothes, it was either wet socks or a used pair. When I find any body of clean water, I will have to do laundry.

I climbed down and almost slipped on the mud, now knowing why Cooper was insulting it earlier.
Looking at the breakfast I almost felt sad.

The brown mushrooms mush and... pancakes?
The thick light brown dough stacked on one another looked appetising, until I grabbed one and it crumbled instantly.

I watched how easily it fell apart in my hand, rubbing my fingers together, only to notice how floury it was.

,,Looks like we both have no talent in the kitchen." I say as I try the mush, it was better than yesterday.

,,,I was trying to make bread but got this wet sand instead."

,,Well the mushrooms are better than yesterday."

,,You could have told me that it was bad, instead of lying." He scoffed and scooped up a piece of 'bread' and crumbling it into the mush.

,,It wasn't bad." I tried to take a step without slipping. ,,Just bland."

He grumbled and climbed up for the hammocks and tarp.
I tried to eat breakfast, but the 'bread' was making it difficult.

,,Your hammock is wet."

,,Yeah, I know."

He was down already and gave me my hammock. I rolled it up and secured it to my bag. I then hung it up on a low branch so it wouldn't get dirty.

After finishing putting the fire out, we continued the trek. Cooper said that walking on the road might be better since he wanted to avoid the brown sludge.

The gravel road left the woods and stretched over the horizon with overgrown fields. It might be difficult to find any shelter out here.

I did see a patch of trees in the distance to the left.
,,Where do you plan to set up camp?"

,,You'll see."

He continued forward for an hour or so before he turned left and walked in the knee-high grass.

I followed confused.
Is he actually planning to camp out there?
Better than trying to find any building before nightfall I guess.

We walked for several minutes and I just wished that no ticks jump on me.
The mud wasn't really helping as I slipped several times, once almost fell but I managed to catch myself.

I jumped when I heard a snarl coming from my left.
Cooper and I whipped around to the canine charging at us.
I felt my stomach sink as the big white dog ran at us at full tilt.

Cooper took out his gun and aimed but didn't shoot.
What is he doing? This is an animal not a human! It won't stop after seeing a gun!

When the canine got closer, I realised how big it was, it was a wolf.

The wolf pounced with open jaws.
Right at me.

My arms instinctively rose to protect my head and I screamed in pain as the wolf jaws clamped around my right hand, knocking me off my feet.

Using my other hand, I grabbed its fur on its neck and tried to pull it off to no avail. Its jaws were crushing my arm in a death grip and its weight on top of me wasn't helping.

Coopers hand grabbed the wolf by the neck and he plunged a knife into its head several times, until the canine grip loosened and it fell to the ground.

My heart is beating uncontrollably as I watch the now dead wolf.
I crawl away from the corpse and flinch when hands grab my arms and pull me up.

Cooper grabbed my arm and started checking it over.

I tried to calm down, yet at the same time I was looking everywhere but my injured arm.
I had a feeling that seeing my own blood won't help me. I could feel tears sliding down my cheeks already.

,,It's okay, you had worse." Cooper said and grabbed his bloody knife. He shook his head and grabbed my pocketknife hanging from my bag and cut my sleeve off.

He then proceeded in pouring water over the injury. It stung so badly that it made me look.
I swallowed as the blood mixed with water that fell to the ground.

Cooper then took my sleeve he cut off and rinsed it as well, before wrapping it around my arm.
,,There, you will be fine."

He grabbed the wolf and dragged it behind him as he continued walking.
It took me a second to get up and follow him as I tried to ignore the growing pain.

Am I infected? That how the zombies work, no?

,,Am I?" I ask quietly.

Cooper looked over his shoulder. ,,What?"

,,Am I infected?"

He stared at me before shaking his head. ,,Did you touch the fog?"

,,No."

,,Then you're fine." He continued walking towards the trees. ,,When I worked in the lab, every strand was meant to fuse with cells in your body. It's like trying a blood transfusion with two different blood types."

It took me a while to fully understand what he was saying. I was no scientist or a doctor, but I knew one thing.
,,Doesn't transfusion with wrong blood type cause shock or death?"

,,It does."

,,So I am going to die."

,,No." He groaned in annoyance.

,,But you just said-"

,,Forget it! Unless it's a strand that was developed after my leave, I'm fairly sure you're gonna be okay."

I didn't ask another question as he was stomping away, dragging the dead canine.

I silently followed and bit back at the pain.
I should clean it again just for sure. We didn't have any disinfection or antibiotics and I'm quite sure that a dog bite can infect easily.

We reached the patch of trees later that day and Cooper made a fire, as well as started butchering the carcass.

I sat down, not allowed to climb with my arm. It wasn't broken but it for sure hurt a lot, it will probably leave a scar.

I imagined the attack once again, the wolf charging and Cooper taking aim...
Right! Why didn't he shoot?

,,Why didn't you shoot?"

Cooper clearly hesitated as his arms stopped the process of cutting the meat.
,,There's a fort nearby. I didn't want to give our position away."

,,Didn't you say that you hate forts?"

,,I'll tell and show you tomorrow."

Chapter 12

When Cooper told me that he will explain why he wanted to avoid forts, I thought that he will tell me what happened to him.
What I didn't expect was for him to lead me towards the fort and hide on the nearby hill.

We were currently hiding behind trees and bushes, crouching and observing the lively fort. People were outside with cattle and sheep, some were tending to crops. The big wall of steel plates was intimidating to say the least.
It was maybe two stories high and wrapped around the entirety of the small town.

People inside the fort were working as well, some were going in and out from big military tents. Lookout towers built inside the wall were impressive as well. Each one had at least three people, with weapons of course.

,,Bromhead Fort. A wall built around a small ghost town, Last time I saw it there was maybe over 100 people inside. Nice and welcoming to anyone, unless you're infected. The infected are welcome to trade but can't enter inside."

,,Okay? What exactly are we doing here? Will we go trading? And if I remember correctly, you said that forts should not be trusted." My eyes didn't leave the fort.

They looked interesting. Living what could be described as a normal life in a world like this. They did seem very nice as I could see some of them laughing as they worked, so I had no idea where his distaste to forts came from.

,,I just wanted to show you that some forts are okay. Usually the small ones. And you can trade with them, clothes, batteries, electronic or even anything metal."

I nodded absently as I watch them work. A few people came from

the forest into the clearing with a white deer. Hunters most likely, with their prize.

,,Didn't you say that more animals are around the forts? And yet their sheep and cattle are normal."

He hummed and got up, slowly walking back into the forest.
,,They lead the animals back inside before the dark. When evacuation took place, people weren't the only ones getting evacuated."

I hurried behind him as he walked back towards our camp.
If he wanted, he could just tell me about this place, why bother losing time to travel by almost two hours just to look and not even trade.
But at the same time, do we even have anything to trade?
We were getting things that were useful to us.

,,Soo, want to tell me why you hate forts so much if you think some of them are nice?" I asked like a curious child.

He growled something under his nose but surprisingly, answered.
,,I used to live in one, remember? The leadership was horrible, too many people in one fort and just plain uncomfortable."

,,That doesn't explain why you hate forts so much."

He sighs deeply and slowed down after bit.
,,When I left with my family to go find you, we ran into some troublesome situations. Bandits, infected and some forts as well. Me and my son ended up in an argument after a run in with a bandit group. He and my wife left and went somewhere north to find a fort. Me and my daughter continued on."

He took a deep breath as he jumped over a fallen log.

,,At first I insisted that she should go with them and I will find them after I get you, but things didn't go as planned. She... ended up getting infected."

My face fell after hearing this, but so far every infected person I met was... well, normal?

,,What happened to her?"

He was silent for a few moments before continuing his story.
,,At first it was okay, as if it never happened. But after she started showing symptoms, white hair and eyes, she changed. The calm book worm I knew became irritated at everything. She sometimes even attacked me, but she would never hurt me. Her hair changed, but my little girl didn't. I knew her. I knew that she wouldn't hurt a fly."

He kicked a random pinecone so hard I didn't even know where it flew off to.

,,We went trading and that fort instantly pointed their weapons at her, as if she could do anything to them. Before we could even leave, they shot her."

I watched as he walked away, stunned at what he told me.
Having a family member die because they got infected must have been hard.

,,I'm sorry."

He nodded his head slightly as he continued walking, not paying attention to anything.
I tried to catch up with him, but I tripped over so many things that it made me start to wonder if nature hates me.

We arrived at our camp in maybe two hours, the only indicator that somebody camped here was the extinguished fire.
Our hammocks were already rolled up and packed in the bags that were hidden under a fallen log and some branches.

Cooper looked more at ease now, having cooled off in the time we walked. He wanted to go more east in the forest. That way we will stay hidden but still go to our destination.

I grabbed our bags and we started walking through the dense woods.
One thing that is true was that there definitely were a lot more animals around the fort. No wonder we almost never seen any. If so

many animals gather around populated places and the forts kill them, it was a miracle that the animals didn't go extinct.

As we walked there was rather uncomfortable silence between us. I occupied myself with looking for anything edible.

My eyes locked on a white blob on one of the pines, the furry creature hasn't seen us yet. If I sneak up on it, I might be able to hunt it, even if it sees us, it shouldn't be a problem.

I was sick of eating squirrels, so the change was rather exciting. Putting my bag aside I slowly start to make my way toward the tree, keeping as low as possible.

Cooper noticed my slow crawl towards the white raccoon and rolled his eyes.
I focused on my steps to make as little noise as possible.

When I was almost an arm reach away from the tree the animal was on, an arrow hit it in the back and the raccoon fell down.

I turned with a frown at Cooper.
,,I almost had it!"

,,And what were you planning on doing when you're under it? Climb up? With your arm?"

Realisation hit me. He is right, I completely forgot about my right arm. No bones were broken but it does hurt quite a bit when I use it. I still need to clean the wound with water.

,,Still, it doesn't give you and excuse to steal my prey." I pouted as I lifted the heavy raccoon, I didn't realise how heavy those can get.

,,Bring it here so I can gut it."

I gave the raccoon to him, and he gutted it in only few minutes, then he strapped the corpse to his bag and started walking, leaving what was left for scavengers.

We didn't even walk for ten minutes when a rabbit jumped out of a bush and started attacking Cooper, kicking and biting at his pants

and shoes. He glared at the small critter but just pushed it with his shoe.

Since we already have meat, it would be wasteful to kill another one, besides that fat raccoon will provide enough meat to smoke the leftovers.

Unfortunately for us, more animals were showing up. From rabbits to raccoons and squirrels. Cooper was getting more and more annoyed every time something tried to bite him.

He suddenly stopped and crouching down signalled to me to do the same. I did and looked for the cause of his concern.
Then I saw it, two bucks grazing on some green grass. Both animals looked calm, for now at least.

It was intriguing, if they weren't white, I would have thought that those were immune. They didn't look aggressive.

,,I thought so." Cooper mumbled as he observed the animals with analysing gaze.
,,If there was only one, I would approach and see if it attacked me but it's too much of a risk when there are two."

I looked at him with annoyance as I had no idea what he was talking about.
,,I will need more explanation than that to understand what you're trying to say."

He grunts and starts sneaking away from the two bucks. With a roll of my eyes I follow behind him.

I just want to know what he meant or wanted to check, but he ignores my questions, again. At this point I might just stop asking.

When we were far enough from the animals we stood up and walked away. Cooper was mumbling something under his nose, furrowing his eyebrows.

I just want to make a camp and eat. We haven't eaten since this morning, so I bet he is starving as well.

Come to think of it, it would be better to camp at the outskirts of the forest. The closer we were to the fort the more animals showed up. I would hate to wake up when a squirrel bit me.

Cooper pointed to a bunch of pines close together, so we head that way. He climbs up to hang the hammocks and I'm tasked with collecting sticks and branches for a fire.

I managed to come back without getting lost and started the fire before he was done. He started to cut the raccoon into edible pieces and I made small kebabs.
Now the hardest part of the cooking, don't let it burn.

Cooper checked our water situation and decided that we should head towards a river or a lake. That will give me an opportunity to wash my clothes and maybe even wash myself.
Just because I started living like a vagabond doesn't mean I have to smell like one.

,,So, will you tell me what that was? Your desire to get mauled by one buck I mean."

,,I doubt those would attack."

I blinked in confusion as he turned the kebabs on the fire.
,,What do you mean?"

He grabbed his bag and pulled out some salt for our food.
,,When I was working with BlueBell Company. We had maybe fifteen strands, each somewhat different. One of them was just a poison that would take days to kill and that's when I decided to stop working there. I couldn't tell anyone what was happening inside the company as I signed a contract that prevented me from telling."

He grabbed one kebab and bit into it, since he didn't make any kind of disgusted face, I grabbed one as well.

,,Pedro worked there longer and said that there were almost sixty or seventy new strands. Each categorised differently. But since he only checked the blood samples and test subjects, rabbits and rats I mean, he also has no idea which one leaked. Some were just

altering DNA, others killed instantly and some were completely harmless."

,,Can someone be immune?" I asked as I bit into my food.

He just shrugged his shoulders.
,,For all we know, this strand might be just altering DNA. I haven't met anyone who died because they were infected, but I definitely saw infected people going rampage like the animals did. That's why I don't want to get close to infected strangers. When Ali, my daughter, got infected, she didn't change a lot. She was just irritated and in pain."

People who were infected are still people.
That is what I knew. Every infected I met on the way was nice or at least didn't try to rip us apart.
Even animals, they are infected but mostly die because of other animals or get hunted by people.

,,I'm sure you're going to figure it out and then somehow stop this from happening. And even if it's impossible it's not that bad. Just a bunch of blood thirsty animals, forts, infected people and bandits."

,,Thank you for summing that up." He glared at me with a frown.

Chapter 13

A whole week passed since Cooper showed me the fort. He showed me two more as we walked and even tried to show the pros and cons of living in one.
I wasn't really interested in that at all.

It was as if his demeanor turned upside down. A man who cursed the forts is now trying to paint them in better light.

I took my shoes and socks off before rolling my pants slightly up, we stopped at a stream, and I definitely saw some crayfish. Turning rock after rock I managed to catch a few, not enough to eat by themselves but enough to add them into a stock.

Eating meat from the infected animals started making me slightly sick, nothing too severe, just hard to swallow. So Cooper managed to catch two pigeons.

Unfortunately, we were running out of salt and other spices. So the trading might be necessary in the near future.

I grabbed another one of the gray crayfish and walked out of the water in hopes of doing some laundry as well today. After all it's not every day that we make camp this early next to a body of water.

The crayfish were safely in a plastic container with some water and inside my bag as I grabbed the dirty clothes and soap, in hopes of getting them somewhat clean.

,,Hey kid, what you're doing." Cooper came back with another handful of wood.

,,Laundry, also I got some crayfish in my bag. You can start cooking them if you want."

He took out the gray creatures and stared at them for a few

seconds.
,,How in the name of animals do I cook 'em."

I just shrugged my shoulders.
,,I caught them. You cook them."

He walked away grunting as he stared at the crayfish in confusion. Maybe he never saw them before.

Shaking my head, I grabbed the first thing to wash, my hoodie. I thoroughly soaked it and with the help of soap tried to get rid of the stains. Some of them were easy to remove, but one oil stain on my pants definitely didn't want to go.

I gave up on the stain and called it a work done. All of my clothes, minus the ones I was wearing, were clean-ish now.

After hanging them on low branches I walk back to the camp where Cooper is boiling the meat. Except the crayfish, those were still alive in the plastic box.

,,What about the crayfish?" I ask as I sit down on a fallen log, hoping that no termites called it home.

,,I have no idea how to cook them." He glares at the small grey shellfish.

,,Cut the head of and throw them in. Unless you're a psychopath, then throw them in alive."

He glares at me before grabbing the container and pulling one of the shellfish out.
I rather clean my arm then watch him kill a bunch of crayfish.

I peel the fabric, that was once a sleeve off the wound. It didn't look extremely bad, just red around the wound. Cleaning it every day definitely helped as it looked way better, but it was still rather painful.

,,Doesn't look infected." Cooper commented and threw the headless crayfish to the boiling water with the pigeon meat.

,,Lucky me." The sarcasm in my response wasn't intended but was definitely present.
,,It's taking us much longer to get to Crystal Falls."

,,Yeah."

Cooper seemed to be deep in his thoughts. Fine by me as I could focus on different stuff. Making sure that no animals were close by was one of them.

I got up and decided to check the surrounding forest as well as get some more water from the stream.

My leisure walk was nice and calming, a big welcome after the fast pace we lately used. Hiding and sneaking around forts seemed to be Coopers new hobby.

The stream was right in front of me, so I grabbed and filled the bottles with cool water. As well as lowering my exposed scabbed wound in the water.

I cleaned the fabric as well and let it dry with the rest of the clothes. We were rather close to another fort as Cooper showed me yesterday, but I doubt someone will come across our camp.

On the way back I looped around the camp and when I was sure that nothing other than birds and few mice were around I walked back to sit next to the fire.

Cooper was still there, looking lost in his own world apparently and the boiling water almost spilling over the small pot.

Instantly grabbing two sticks and taking the pot off i glared at the daydreaming man.
,,You almost allowed dead animals to run away."

He flinched and looked at the pot before shaking his head.
,,It's fine. Just salt it or something."

I rolled my eyes and put the pot on the ground. All the crayfish turned red and the meat looked cooked as well. If we had any vegetables, we could make a soup out of it.

Using the sticks I try to take the pigeons out, but the meat just falls apart, much to my irritation. When I finally manage to take the meat out I put them on our plastic plates and add several shellfish on each plate. I gave Cooper more as he would eat more than I could.

I think he is starting to get back to normal. Less talking and more walking type of normal.

After we were done with eating Cooper grabbed the plates and went to clean them, as well as do his own laundry.
I stayed and boiled some of the water I brought back from the stream.

The hammocks were already hung up in the trees, out of sight. We still had some of the daylight to ourselves so I might be able to dig out my forgotten book.

The water boiled rather quickly so I put the pot aside to let it cool down. I made the mistake of pouring boiling water into a plastic bottle once. It costed me a slight burn and the bottle was unusable after that.

,,Kid, add some leaves to the fire. We're smoking meat." Cooper shouted as he emerged from some shrubs with a dead rabbit.

,,Where did you find it? I haven't seen any rabbits around."

He grunted as he looked down at his left shoe.
,,Seems like those critters like you more than me. That little bugger managed to sneak up on me."

I grabbed some leaves on the ground and put them next to the fire while Cooper skinned and cut the critter.

Using some fishing line we secured the meat to a fairly straight branch.
He grabbed two more sticks and drove them into the ground to act as support.

I slowly added some leaves on the almost burned out fire, making a lot of smoke. It will take most of the day to smoke the rabbit.

I got up and decided to go grab more leaves, since we might need it.

Walking deeper into the forest I examined some mushrooms but I doubt those were edible, besides some animal got to them first. The pine trees provided some shade from the sun as well as the wind.

If I'm not mistaken one fort is maybe three hours from camp.
I step over a fallen tree and stop instantly.

Covering my nose from the awful stench I feel my stomach turn and twist.
The sight isn't any better.

On the ground, covered in pine needles and leaves is a corpse. Decomposing for some time from the smell and how mingled it was. It was hard to tell if it was a man or woman.

Their body looked shriveled and some bone was shoving, maggots eating away at the rotten flesh, animals must have gotten to this person too.
This wasn't something I wanted to find, let alone do what I done next.

I walked closer to the body and tried to peek at the face. The skull was visible, no eyes remained and the skin was almost black. The smell was hundred times worse up close. The skull however had a hole in it.

Flesh was almost gone or dried up, the hair was nowhere to be seen. The shirt rolled up a little, revealing the ribs or rather the cavity in which the mangled remains of organs were. What was the most intriguing was the color of the organs. They were gray.

This person was dead for some time and the clear bullet hole in the head told me more than I needed to know how they died.

I felt sorry for whoever this was. Losing their life, not to the fog, but to the people who survived.
It seems like some people are more dangerous than the fog.

Stepping back and slowly turning around I went back to camp.

Cooper might want to know about this, just in case.

The smell of smoke greeted me when I finally reached the camp. Cooper was writing something but when he noticed me he quickly stopped.
Did I looked that scared?

,,There's a body." Pointing in the general direction I finally felt somewhat more at ease. The whole way back I thought I heard or saw something, but I might just be paranoid.

,,Where." He got up and walked towards me.

,,This way." Pointing again I stepped to the side, allowing him to pass me and go. ,,It's decomposing, but still rather unnerving."

Without stopping or slowing down he said. ,,Show me."

I wish he didn't. I don't need to see it again as I already know that I might have nightmares.
Slowly going towards the murder place again I listened and watched everything.

Cooper eventually slowed down, allowing me to catch up and take lead. This time I smelled it sooner than seeing it.

When the remains were visible, I stopped and Cooper went to investigate.
He took only a glance before his face scrunched up as he backed away.

,,Infected. The organs are gray, meaning the blood was white." He backed up until he was beside me. ,,Dead for some time, maybe several weeks. Shot in the head."

I nodded grimly. I used to see some roadkill, but a dead human in the woods? This just feels wrong.
,,Let's go back."

Cooper nodded and we went back towards the camp. It will be a miracle if I fall asleep today.
As we walked, both of us were on high alert. The one who was

responsible might be in the area or even be a resident of the nearby fort.

When we got back to camp the smoke was almost gone and the fire barely lit. Cooper added a few sticks and leaves and I went to retrieve our clothes.

The clothes were still damp but if left next to the fire for a few minutes they will be dry in no time.

When I got back to camp I wrapped my arm with the cloth again and climbed to my hammock. I didn't feel safe here, not after seeing the dead body, it reminded me of my Tio. I try my hardest to muffle my sobs as i lay on my side and watch the trees sway with theg gentle wind.

Sun was still fully visible and we still had maybe two or three hours of sunlight left, so I tried distracting myself with my book.

Cooper remained below and smoked the rabbit some more.

Tomorrow I want to leave. Immediately.

Chapter 14

The sun shone in my eyes, waking me up unfortunately. I would love some more sleep but apparently the sun doesn't care about that.

It is rather chilly today, the breeze sending a shiver down my spine. I stretched in my hammock and looked down expecting to see Cooper, but to my surprise he was nowhere to be seen.

Did he go hunting or for water?
That didn't make sense to me as we hunted and got water yesterday.

His hammock is also gone, he must have packed it already and wants to leave as soon as I'm ready.

After climbing down, I noticed that the fire was out, so he didn't go for water or food. Maybe he went to check the area and make sure that its safe.

I need to get the hammock down first, then I will just wait for him and we can go.
Climbing up wasn't the problem, it was untying the knot Cooper made. I just wanted to cut the rope at that point, but when the knot finally loosened, I grinned like a little child, until I remembered that there's the second knot on the other side.

After successfully getting the hammock down and rolling it up I looked for my bag. I remember hanging it next to my hammock on a branch yesterday, but it seems like Cooper moved it.

I looked around and spotted it under a tree. So he did move it.
,,Cocoguy!" I shouted, just in case he was close by and could hear me.

The bag had some additional food, the rabbit he smoked yesterday, and a full bottle of water.

,,Cooper?"

Where did that guy go?
Rummaging through my bag I found a folded piece of paper. Confused I grabbed it and unfolded it gently. It definitely wasn't new as the paper was slightly yellow.

It was a note left by him as Cooper signed his name as if it was a letter.
Some words and sentences were unreadable as he scratched them so much some places had tiny tears.

I started to read the note quietly.

,,Look kid,
I'm not good with words and writing it down felt like the best option for me.
I gave a promise to Pedro that if anything happened to him, I would take care of you, but I feel like I can't keep the promise anymore.

It's not your fault kid, just go to the fort, they will welcome you and live your life there. Living inside will be easier for you and you won't die out here.

-Cooper"

I stared at the note in disbelief. This had to be a bad joke he made. There's no way he just left me here.

The longer I stand here the more real it seems to me. He suddenly started talking about forts like those were the safest places on earth, as if he never cursed at forts before.
His sudden will to show me every fort we went by and risk the animal attacks and getting spotted.

I scan the campsite for any of his belongings. Any indication that he was pulling a horrible joke on me.
His bag was gone, his hammock is gone, he is gone.

My breathing picked up as a sudden wave of panic hit me.
He left. He's gone. He left me alone.
Reading the note again, again and again I start to wonder. Why?

Was it something I did? What did I do?

I try to calm myself, breathing deeply and closing my eyes. It takes me some time, but my breathing is back to normal, and I open my eyes again.

Looking at the note one more time I read it again.
,,Go to the fort..." I read out loud, and the next second, all of my anxiety suddenly turned to anger, rage even.
Crumpling the note in my hands I grab my bag and throw the note inside and pack the hammock.

,,If you think I will give up then you're wrong. You hear me Cooper?! I'm not giving up! I made a promise, and I will keep it!" I shout at the top of my lungs, feeling the tears slide down my cheek.
I dug through the bag and took out the compass and go south-east.

I'm upset and furious!
If he thinks I will just go to the closest, safest place possible and give up then he better think again.

I lived by travelling across the entire continent before the fog! What changed? Dangerous fog and aggressive animals, but that won't stop me!

The more I walk the more I realise some problems.
Cooper was the one who always heard the animal, if they come from left, I have no issue in hearing them, but if they come from right, I have trouble hearing anything.
Another problem is my lack of a map. Cooper had the map we used as the one we had before was useless after we left that small town Smith.
And there's also the bandits and animals on the way.

Shaking my head, I continue walking with determination. If I keep thinking about the downs I won't notice the ups.

By the time I reached the end of the forest I was breathing hard from the long and fast trek.
The sun was high in the sky and the road ahead is filled with overgrown fields and some trees here and there.

If needed I will just climb a tree and tie myself to it, but the farmlands had one thing in common. There usually was a farmhouse somewhere.

Even if I spot something I will just hide in the tall grass or make a run for it on the trees. Unfortunately, Cooper was the only one with a gun or a bow.

Thinking about it I purse my lips. Even if I had the bow, I was a terrible shot. The only type of weapon I ever used was a knife and I never actually killed anything with it, just skinning and cutting... and I gave that knife to the infected guys.

I had no weapons, an injured arm and some food and water.
,,Just like old days." I chuckled to myself and started walking.

I'm starting to believe that Cooper was slowing me down. After all the first plan was getting to Eva in maybe three to four months. And it took us a week to pass three forts.

And forts were apparently built in many towns and villages. That is what both of them said at least.

I was walking until I saw a house in the distance, a big white house with an overgrown lawn and broken windows. Someone raided the house, but it didn't stop me from sleeping on the roof today.

I'm already starving, maybe not eating anything today was a poor choice, but the second I get there I'm setting up a fire.

Surprisingly there was almost no animals I could see, some birds that flew by and some mice and rabbits. But those aren't really threatening.

I just hope that finding a bow will be easy as I have no idea how to make a working one. I tried once when I was a kid, but I couldn't even draw the string back.

As I got closer, I quickly searched the yard. The only things I found was a shovel and a dog skeleton.
Poor thing was left tied up to a pole.
The roof was mostly pointy, but luckily to me there was a section of

a flat roof over a small terrace at the front of the house. If there's no rain today, I'm pretty lucky.

Now, how do I get up there? I didn't find any ladder and there was no way I'm climbing that high.
Pursing my lips, I check if the door is unlocked.

To my surprise it is. Cooper would instantly say that it's too risky, but I'm not him.

Slowly walking inside, I carefully check each corner, there was plenty light to keep the fog away.
I could see the glowing mist under the furniture and slowly seeping under one door, most likely a cellar, only to slowly disappear.

Taking a deep breath and gathering all my courage I step closer to the stairs. My anxiety rose slightly as I could not see the second part of the stairs.
And there was no window in this part of the house as well.

Shaking my head, I just start slowly going up the stairs and then I peeked around the corner. No fog or door, just another part of the house.

,,Why did they think that it's dangerous?" I wonder out loud and with much more confidence ascend the rest of the stairs.
Upstairs there are two more rooms, one on each side of the corridor and a door to the terrace straight ahead.

I grab the handle and easily open the glass door to the outside, before throwing my bag on the roof and climbing onto the railing and pulling myself up.

That went easier than I thought. Now the important task of making myself something to eat. I scoot closer to my bag and rummage inside for some of the rabbit jerky and chew on one piece.

I look at the sun as it slowly inches to the horizon, there's still several hours of sunlight left.
,,I need a plan." I whisper to myself as I bite into the chewy meat.

If I want to get to Eva in one piece I will need a map, as only using

a compass will get me nowhere. I rather not hike over a mountain for no reason.

Crystal Falls is supposed to be east, but that's not helping that much. Without a map I can miss the fort and end up who knows where.
Maybe if I find a town or a city, I can look for a map. I can also ask someone for directions. The infected people are usually rather friendly, so I might try asking if I meet them.

Since I already walked through the house, I might try to look for anything useful.
I slowly get back on the terrace and walk back inside, before going downstairs.
The kitchen looked rather empty as the shelves were cleaned out. The fridge was closed but I was fairly sure that there was nothing edible inside.

Using a pan that was lying on the floor I open several cupboards, but only find cutlery and some cloth. I leave them as I have no use for them and look for anything that was left inside other cupboards. The glowing mist hid inside unfortunately so I had to jump back several times.

I open yet another cupboard and smile in victory. A can of tomato soup was left behind by the previous raiders. Using the pan, I try my best to take it out into the light. I left it in the sunlight for a minute or so just to be sure before grabbing it. I checked the expiration date.
It was still good for consumption, much to my growing happiness.

Deciding that I will check the rest tomorrow I head back up. I wanted to check some of the rooms before the fog started expanding.
I get back upstairs and open the door to my right. The room was painted a light shade of pink and several dolls were on the bed, some drawings of unicorns were on the walls as well.

I would say that once a girl called this her room, unless that was a boy that really loved unicorns and dolls.
One look at a neon orange shirt on the floor told me that I wouldn't

find fitting clothes here, so I closed the door and turned my attention to the other one.

As I opened the door I was met with a dark blue room with a computer and books everywhere. Now this was more interesting to me, I could use a new book. One bed next to a shelf, a big wardrobe and the desk with the computer and some other equipment I didn't recognise.

I check the room more closely and note that the fog was under the bed and under one of the shelves. Keeping distance from those places I walk inside and using the pan I open the big wardrobe. Jumping back as the fog rolled out, I check the clothes size. The pants were definitely too big for me but a sweater or a shirt could be fine.

Whoever lived here must have been a fan of flute as one was inside the wardrobe. It's a pity that I can't play one.

Once the fog disappeared in the sunlight, I picked one light blue shirt and a brown sweater. With these items in hand, I made my way towards the terrace.

Raiding houses wasn't as hard as I thought. It was just the fear of the fog that stopped us before.

Chapter 15

If I thought that surviving here alone would be easier, I was severely mistaken.
With Cooper around I could relax more as he was way more vigilant than me, but now? I almost got a heart attack yesterday from a hedgehog and got chased around by a beaver the day before. I fear what could happen if I stray too close to a fort where most animals are. The worst-case scenario is death most likely.

I was lucky when I found that farmhouse three days ago, ever since then I was sleeping on trees. The feeling of getting lost also wasn't the most calming right now but walking straight and hoping to find any kind of city or town showed surprisingly rewarding.

Yesterday I spotted the buildings from a small hill and the walk there should be rewarding. If people didn't go inside the building, I might find just what I need. I was hoping for a map and some supplies, preferably food.
Eating the leftover smoked meat and mushrooms all the time made me sick to the stomach whenever I stopped to eat.

As I got closer, I tried to find any street sign that would reveal the city name to me. Who knows I might know it and the feeling of being lost would go away, it would solve some of my worries, not that I had many in the first place. I guess my carefree nature will be the end of me someday.

I spot an airport, perfect way to find out what city it is. I walk along the highway to town and stop when I find what I was looking for.

,,Minot aero center." Staring at the big letters glued to the building I scoff in disbelief. ,,Minot?" And here I was thinking that I visited every corner of North America.
Now I know what city this is but I'm still pretty much lost.
Well, no one said it will be easy.

I continue to walk in the city in hopes to find the supplies and a safe spot to camp, as well as to avoid bandits. Looking at the broken glass under several buildings I can confidently say that there were people here after the outbreak. But if they stood outside and looted, I might be able to find something inside. Ever since this started and we left the tree house I was once inside a building.

Not daring to enter apartments as the fog could be in the poorly lit staircases I focused on the smaller buildings with large windows and gas stations that could also make a good camp spot this night. It was safer to find a good spot now rather than stress later with limited time.

One of the gas stations had a white van parked right next to it, if I'm lucky I might be able to climb on top of the van and then on the roof.
Scanning the street, I note the awful smell in the city, like something was rotting here and it wasn't just the garbage. Crossing the road, I take note of how the upper windows of apartments are intact, the survivors couldn't get to them, but I doubt that the infected would not jump at the possibility of supplies.

I walk over to the white van and look around for anything I could use as a stepping stool, yet there's nothing like that around.
Well, it looks like I will need to do this myself. Placing one foot on the left tire and supporting myself on the mirror I pull myself up until I'm standing on the hood. At this point I just hope that the windshield won't break. Once I'm sure that I won't fall I jump on the vans roof and then jump on top of the gas station. It takes some struggle to pull myself up as I never was one to exercise.

Once there I shrug my bag off and take only the necessities for looting, that means my pocketknife and two plastic bags I found on the road. With that I leave my bag on the roof and get down the same way I got up.

I might have another three to four hours of daylight left so I shouldn't go far. I doubt that the airport would have anything that would be useful, so I won't backtrack there.
My attention is caught by a small building, so I go investigate.

The small, one-story brick building looked like one of those shops but after looking in through the untouched windows I realized why nobody looted it. It was a flower shop. Guess there's nothing interesting inside, so I continued forward. It seems like this part of the city didn't have a lot of big houses, mostly simple family houses and big block shops.

I walked straight and looked inside every house, even if the windows were broken, in hopes of finding anything the other people didn't take. Some houses had the 'beware dog' signs in the windows as the houses didn't have fences. If not for the overgrown grass and broken windows this would be a very nice neighborhood. One house was even for sale, guess nobody will move in for the time being, for obvious reasons.

I stop at an intersection, I can either go right and look at more of those houses or I can go left and try my luck on the other side of the park. With one look at the houses on my right I walk towards the park. The fence wasn't tall so jumping over wouldn't be a problem, but the gate was missing so I just walked in. Why do parks even need fences?

Following the river I make my way deeper inside the park, and to my surprise I find a... parking lot? Behind the parking lot there seem to be a waterslide. Was there a swimming pool?
I slowly walk closer and there in fact is a pool with one big slide, I was rather surprised as I have never really seen a swimming pool in a place like this, but maybe it's because I never looked for things like that.

Continuing in my search I cross a bridge over the river and find another neighborhood. Small houses closely together and the same thing across the street. To my surprise and maybe even luck some houses windows were intact.

I walked to the closest building with intact windows and looked inside. Big room with a couch and a TV, it's a pity that it wouldn't work. It would be much easier with electricity around. Upon closer look there I notice that the door is open and in the other room is

what looks like a dinner table with some pots laying around. A pot would be useful to me, it will be a hassle to carry around but at least I won't have to boil water in a tin can. Mentally noting which house holds the pots I carry on. I will come back for them later.

As I step away from the window a sharp pain on my ankle makes me jump. Looking down I try to get the small white attacker off my pants, but the murderous squirrel does not want to let go. I Didn't even notice that thing coming, luckily it isn't something bigger.

,,Come here you little-" I grab the squirrel and hold it by its tail as it wiggles around and tries to bite me. ,,Stop or you will end up in a stew."
The squirrel does not stop, of course. If I let it go it will just come at me again and I don't want to kill it. I don't even have a knife that would do the job. All I have is my pocketknife and it is not sharp enough.

Hoping that one of the doors is open I try each one until I find an open door. As gently as possible I throw the white furry creature inside before closing the door. I then proceed to check my leg, but the wound wasn't that worrying. It will heal on its own. Just to be sure though I will clean it with some of my water once I get back to the camp.

Continuing with my search I notice that the houses that had fences would sometimes have also bones of their house pets. Some dogs were left alone and those that could not jump the fence ended up starving, or maybe even killed by the stronger ones. Now I know where that horrible smell was from.

After some time searching, I came up empty handed. I found no map, but I did find some dried strawberries, which I instantly hid in my pocket. Well, since it will be getting dark soon I might as well head back.
I rounded a corner and stopped in my tracks as a human stood on the sidewalk, several feet in front of me.

She was infected and apparently alone, so I slowly started approaching. ,,Hello?" I call out quietly, so I won't spook her. She

must have heard me as she started looking around.

She hasn't seen me as her back was turned towards me. The woman's long white hair glistens in the sunlight as she breathes heavily and looks around and then focuses on something on the ground. I notice the white and red streaks of dried blood on her pale hands and pants as I get closer. Suddenly I'm uncertain about asking her for directions or even getting close, something about her made the hair rise on my neck.

I ready myself to call out again, even though every inch of my body tells me not to, but then she whips around and her colorless eyes stare into my own, an injury that looked infected as it had some green ooze under her right eye. It felt like she was staring right through me with her wide eyes.

My stomach dropped as a cold shiver ran through my entire body as she took a step towards me. Her voice too quiet and choked for me to understand as she started talking and reached her arm forward. Her light green shirt stained with her own saliva as it dripped down her chin.

I feel frozen in place as she takes slow steps towards me. That's when I notice a thin metal pipe sticking out from her left side, covered in the same white blood that dripped from the nasty injury. She says something louder but it's just an incomprehensible mumble, like a groan.
I take a shaky breath and it feels like the time slows down.

One second, we are staring at each other, the next I take a step back and she lunges at me with a screech so loud it jolts me back to reality.

I turn and run as fast as my legs can from the screaming woman. Not daring to look back I look everywhere for an escape route and to my luck I spot an open door. Without thinking I jump over a bike laying on the ground and bolt towards the door.

Once I ran past the door I slid to a stop and whip around only to see the woman charging with insane speed towards me. I shut the door

with a bang, and she crashes into it a second after. Her screams and banging don't stop as I put all my weight to keep the door closed.

that's when I notice how dimly lit the building is and how much fog there is under the furniture, slowly disappearing in the sunlight from one, big broken window. I was lucky that there was no fog near me. The woman pushed at the door, nearly opening it to my horror.

I won't be able to hold her back as she started to slam against the door, my shoes are slipping on the tiles, and I start to feel pounding in my head. I don't know what to do as another scream pierced the air.

My eyes glance back at the broken window, but the broken glass immediately seems like a bad idea. I look for any other exit in the abandoned house, three doors and one staircase down, probably basement but nothing that looked like another way outside.
The woman forcefully slams the door and her hand slips though, grabbing the handle and then finding my arm.

I try to pull away, but her grip just gets stronger and stronger, so I push as hard as I can at the door. Her arm trapped between the door and the doorframe, yet she keeps her grip on me. A quiet sob escapes my lips as I feel the tears in my eyes. I feel dizzy as my breaths are shallow and uneven at this point.

An idea rushes through my mind and it seems like the only thing that could work right now. I fight against her grip until I finally free myself and then step to my right, letting the door open and the woman falls to the ground, the pipe ripping though her back and sticking out, completely covered in her blood.

I jump over her and bolt away, towards the apartments and shops, hoping to lose her in an alleyway or hiding somewhere. A sudden screech behind me sent a surge of speed to my legs. She was way faster than I realized. A park to my right made me change directions. It was the same park as before that had the river running through it.

I ran past the open gates and straight towards the river, hoping to lose her in the water. This might be a stupid decision but I'm running out of ideas and breath. Before I reach the end of the trees, I feel something slam into me from behind and I'm sent crashing to the ground. I yelp out as I hit the ground and try to stand up immediately, but the woman's heavy breaths are on my neck in seconds as she pushes me to the ground.

I fight back but laying on my stomach I can't do much as she hits me with her fists and screams. My ears ring painfully as she hits my head several times before I slam my elbow to her head. She slides off me and gives me enough time to roll on my back before she's on top of me again, trying to grab my neck. I try to get her off me, but to no avail.

Suddenly her hands wrap around my neck and squeeze with shocking strength.
I start to panic as she breathes grutally and doesn't let go, no matter what I do. My vision begins to blur as I try to shove her away, my hand starts to feel around me hastily as I try to find anything that could help me.

Suddenly my hand finds something and without thinking I slam it to her head, her hands let go as she falls with a yelp next to me. I try to catch my breath but when I notice her getting up and grabbing at my neck again, I slam the object on her temple again and she falls to the ground, unmoving. My hands are shaking as I look at the rock covered in white and her temple where I first hit her. Her mouth opens and she makes a sound resembling a growl.

Without waiting I spring up and run, never looking behind me to see if she got up. Not stopping until I reach the gas station that I made my camp on. I climb up the white van and collapse on the roof. I couldn't breathe, my lungs felt like they were on fire and my whole body trembled as cold sweat covered my shaking hands. My vision blurry and unfocused as I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. My fingertips brush against my cheek and I feel the wet tears.

I slowly sit up and hug myself as I look on the ledge, expecting the

woman to be there and ready to finish me off. I sit there trembling as the sun slowly dips over the horizon. Each time I think I see something in the corner of my eyes I flinch, imagining the woman there. I close my eyes in hopes to calm down, but it only makes it worse. I see her eyes, dead eyes but she's running straight at me.

,,Tio." I whisper to myself as I remember how he used to pat my back and hug me, comforting me after the funeral of my father. He would put a blanket around my shoulders and whisper that it will be okay.

,,Tio." I cry his name as I sit there, and the sun slowly disappears. The screams of the woman ring in my mind, unless She's still out there, looking for me. I want to go home to him. I thought that forgetting him will be easy but it's not and it hurts, it hurts a lot.

,,Tio."

Chapter 16

I couldn't sleep the entire night.
The feeling of being watched and sometimes imagining the shriek of the woman chased any idea of sleep away from me. Before I know it, the sun is rising, casting the warm light on anything it reaches.

The tiredness felt heavy, and even if this wasn't my first sleepless night it surely felt the worst. I was tired, hungry and with a growing migraine, but I know that staying here is a bad idea. It felt like I couldn't trust anyone.

I got up and grabbed my bag, ready to leave, but when I stood up the slight uncomfortable pain on my ankle made me look down. Right, the squirrel bit me yesterday. It would be better if I took care of it right away, since I forgot about it during the stressful night.

Slightly rolling down my sock I expose the small bite, it was a small wound that will heal by itself as it didn't even hurt but I rather be safe and clean it. I only had two bottles of water on me, and one was halfway empty. I will need to get more when I come across another river, but it's better to do it outside the town. Since it was a scab, I see no need to clean it actually.

Getting back up I scan the streets below me with careful gaze. Nothing seemed out of place, there were two small rodents fighting each other. With how fiercely those fight I can't really tell what those are, maybe rats.

I carefully get down from the gas station and look around once more, deciding that going in the direction of the park is a wrong idea I make my way down the street. A slight bang on my left made me jump in fright and my breath to quicken. The two fighting rats knocked over some trash. I can't be this paranoid, can I?

Taking a deep breath, I continue to walk listening to every sound and looking for any movement. I don't want to meet that woman again. Why did she behave differently than the rest of the infected I

met?

Her behavior resembled more of the animal. The only difference was that she wasn't trying to bite me, rather choke me.

The womans face flashed through my mind and my heart skipped a beat at the memory. I could feel the hairs on my arms standing up.

,,Don't think about this. Don't think about this." Whispering to myself I anxiously look over a corner.

Clear. I round the corner and with the pocketknife in hand walk forward. The feeling of not being alone is not pleasant at all.

I know that there are rats and other animals around. The faint sounds I heard ever so often made me jump every time. Be it a tin can knocked over by a rat or the wind suddenly picking up paper.

My feet stopped when I caught a glimpse of a cooking pot inside one of the houses. The inside of the house looked ransacked but whoever looked there, left the pot.

I checked my surroundings before going over to the broken window and glancing inside through it. The carpet looked like someone took a knife to it and the cupboards were open.
The pot itself was on the stove and with how close I am, I could see that the contents inside were covered in thick layer of mold. Great.

Since there was one pot, there could be another. I tried the door and the other side of the house, but it was closed, window it is.

I get closer to look inside mostly below the window to check for the Fog. I jump back with a gasp when my eyes land on the bones inside.

Human bones.

I Crouch down, holding my stomach as an intense wave of chills rolls over my spine. It was the feeling of the stomach-turning upside down.
It scared me. It scared me so much that I felt like crying.

I don't even want to know why that person was dead or what killed them.
I shakily stand up and slowly walk towards the window, looking inside once more.

The bones were right under the window, that's why I didn't see them before. There were no blood stains on the floor, or the carpet and the bones lacked any tissue on them. Unless this person died long time ago then the scavenging animals picked the meat clean.

I shakily put my hoodie on the window frame to avoid cutting my hands and jump inside, barely avoiding landing on the skeletal hand.

The musty and stale smell in the house hit me right in the nose. Even with the window broken the smell lingered inside.

I looked at the stove and the pot of mold. I doubt I could actually use it, as I have no idea if cleaning the pot with water would be enough. Searching the kitchen, I avoid the fridge as well as getting too close to the shelves, as the teal mist can be barely seen under them.

I grab a fork that was lying in the sink and with its help I open one of the shelves. Inside were some chemical products and some sponges. The next one just had the garbage box that unfortunately was halfway full, but the last closed shelf had what I was looking for. The small pot had plastic handles but other than that it was perfect. It held maybe one liter and was surprisingly light. I had to wait for the Fog to disappear before grabbing it.

After a short wait I exited the house with the pot in hand. Now when I get water from a river or a lake, I can boil it. A lighter could be nice as well but I haven't found one of those anywhere. The flint and steel I got should do the job for now, but I doubt I will light a fire after it rains.

I didn't even make ten steps when a sharp pain in my left leg made me jump and yelp. Franticly looking down I see a white Persian cat burying its claws in my leg with a hiss. Its eyes held the same white pupils as all the infected.

I grabbed the cat and tried to pull it away, but the sharp tug only made the pain worse.

The pot fell on the ground forgotten as I try to get the hissing feline off me. The cat's grip only seems to get stronger as it holds onto my leg, digging the claws into my pants and flesh. After a few long painful seconds I pin the cat between the ground and my leg.

I manage to free myself of one of the cat's paws, but like this I won't be able to free myself.
I press more weight onto the cat, but it doesn't let go.

Feeling sorry for the feline I grab the dull pocketknife from my pocket and open it before aiming at the cat chest and looking away. The cat's aggressive growls and hisses stopped when I push the knife down with all my strength.

Pulling the knife out I try to free myself from the claws. I bite back at the pain as I pull the last set of claws away from my leg. My pants were torn and bloody.

The pain brought tears to my eyes as I tried to pull the pants slightly up to check on the wound. Shaking my head, I give up and stand up, trying to take a step, the pain flared up, but I push on.

I grab the pot and continue walking, ever so slowly. I felt my heartbeat inside my skull and my breathing was way too fast.

Not even midday and I was exhausted.
Looking around and trying to camp wouldn't be the best. I was way too close to the park.
But I do need to patch myself and rest.

With a grunt I continue walking towards the outskirts of the city, I never want to come back here again.

Slowly trudging through the streets for what felt like hours I see only apartments and tall buildings.

I might just sleep on the apartment building roof, if there is the way to get there. Some of the apartment buildings had balconies, so I might be able to climb them to the top. Might being the key word.

I look between all the tall buildings and choose the four stories high one. It was tall enough and had balconies fairly low.

With a calming deep breath, I walk over to the closest balcony and try to pull myself up. It will take me a while, but I should be able to climb up and hopefully not fall to my death.

The wolf bite healed quite a bit, I'm not sure about the cat scratches though. I could walk but it definitely hurts a lot. And I will need to clean the wound, again, with my water. And I don't have a lot of it.

My chest feels as if I was between two closing walls, slowly crushing me. I never felt this way, and it started when Tío...

Shaking my head, I try to pull myself to the next balcony. The railing felt slippery or maybe it was my hands. I dared not to look down as I never considered if I have a fear of heights.
Keeping my eyes on the top I push forward until I was at the last balcony.
The roof was just out of reach, and I dared not to jump on the railing.

Breathing heavily, I look around for anything I could use, but unless two plastic flowerpots could be useful there was nothing.
The white door leading inside was tempting, so I tried the handle of the door.
Locked. Just great.

I checked the inside through the windows and to my surprise I could see the fog inside. This was a 4-story tall building and the fog that never left the ground was inside. The highest I ever experienced the fog was one story high, when it almost got inside the tree house.

Maybe it got here one floor at a time. Hiding under furniture during the night and expanding during the night.

Swallowing I realize that the only way onto the roof is either by jumping to another balcony and trying my luck with another door or just jumping up.
Both options were horrible and made my stomach twist, but I had

no other option.

I try to peek at the other balconies but on both sides the doors were closed. The feeling in my stomach only worsens, as I step on the railing and pull myself up. Balancing as I stand up, I try to reach the roof but I'm too short.

With closed eyes I jump and try to grab the edge of the roof, only to miss. I instantly panic when my fingertip brushes against the rough brick and the feeling only worsens when only one of my feet lands on the railing. My left foot missed, and I felt my body tilting backwards, to the certain death.

My left-hand flies towards the metal rail and I manage to catch myself, but I'm also reminded of natural psychic when my back hits the rail. To my utter terror I was hanging from a balcony of a four-story tall building, only holding onto with one hand and leg.
I looked down and yelped when I felt my hand slip a little.
Pulling myself back onto the balcony I collapse.

I pull my legs to my chest and sniffed; the tears slid down my cheeks as I stared at the city. I felt overwhelmed.
I knew one person who would know what to do, but he's gone. Why did it have to be him?

,,Who am I kidding." I tried to laugh. ,,I will never get there alive."
I pulled my legs closer to myself and hugged myself, my body shaking every time a sob escaped me.

Sitting there and crying quietly to myself I watched as the sun slowly lowered until it touched the ground. Taking a deep breath, I shrug my backpack off and grab a bottle of water.

The small pocketknife, still covered in the white blood was used to cut my left pant sleeve off below my knee. The scratches from the cat weren't that deep and stopped bleeding by now so I only cleaned the wounds. I will need a new pair of pants now as I only have one spare.

Packing everything I stand up and glare at the railing. One more time I try to open the balcony door. It didn't budge.

,,I will." Slamming my shoulder against the door with all my strength I could muster. ,,Not stop." I slammed again and again. ,,Trying!"

I slam into the door and hear a crack as the door flew open. Breathing hard and with bruised shoulder I walk inside. I look for the door leading to the hallway. There should be the staircase to the top of the roof. Hopefully.

I open a dark wooden door and finally find the hallway. It was illuminated with a small window and there was the staircase up. I ran up the stairs and was met with another door. I grabbed the door and pulled. Locked.

,,Oh, you're kidding me." I groaned and pulled at the door, only for the handle to slip out and almost falling off the stairs. I throw the handle behind me in frustration and run back inside the apartment and look around for anything that could help me open the door. A crowbar would be perfect but unless a thief lived here, I doubt I will find one.

Runing back inside the kitchen I start opening the shelves and cupboards, letting the remaining sunlight clear the fog. A knife. A knife would work or maybe a meat tenderizer I think.

I grab a steak knife and a bread knife before running back to the hallway, the fog was already expanding but I should have enough time, if it works at least.

Using the bread knife, I slide it between the door and the frame, then I push at the knife handle. I push with all my strength until I feel the door bend ever so slightly, but the knife breaks.
Not giving up I do the same with the steak knife and push, the door cracks and I push it open with my shoulder.

With a sigh of relief, I pull myself on the roof over the door. The sun was almost completely gone. I look through my bag and find the leftover smoked meat and finally eat something.

After eating I make myself as comfortable as I can and try to fall asleep, it takes me a long time before I feel drowsy and each time,

I'm half asleep I can feel myself falling. Tio's death also plagues my mind as I remember as his body became colder and colder. The memory of the woman screeching and chasing me also keeps me awake.

The feeling of helplessness crushes my chest as tears slowly fill my eyes, my hands are trembling by the time I get up and look down to see the fog gently swirling around. Its slow movements are somehow calming and the faint glow it emits is comforting in a way. I never thought that the thing I would be running away from could be this calming.

I slowly reach my hand down, hovering just above the teal fog. The closer my hand was the colder my fingertips were, as if this unnatural mist was emitting the cold.
I slowly let one of my fingertips touch the fog, but the weird tingling sensations brings me back to reality and I pull my hand back.

Chapter 17

Two days ago, I was stupid enough to touch the fog, I have no idea what went through my mind. It was like I stopped thinking for a short moment of desperation. Yesterday I felt fine, and it seemed like nothing happened, but today I just don't feel right. Even if I wanted to explain this feeling to someone, I might be unable to. I just feel sick. My fingertips are tingling and slightly pale, and when I touch anything, it feels like thousand needles stabbing me. My stomach is upset all the time, and my eyes feel dry, not to mention the headache.

Yesterday I got out of the city and managed to walk until I couldn't see it anymore and found my current camping place before dark. An old oak tree that looks like it will crumble to dust at any time.

Looking at the sun that was slowly making its way upwards I decided that it was time to get up, even though I felt like crap. With a groan I sit up on the branch and feel my spine crack as if I was over eighty. It's surprising that I haven't fallen while sleeping last night.

Taking a deep breath of fresh air, I feel a weird taste in my throat, it was bitter and slightly metallic, like soap almost. It really reminded me of that time when I was a kid and just had to know how soap tasted like. I try to swallow the unpleasant taste, but it only seems to make it stronger.

Grabbing the bottle of water, I notice that it was only halfway full, meaning it was time to get more. There should be a stream or a lake since the city had a river running through it. Hopefully I will find it. I slowly take a sip of water and almost spit it out at the awful taste, the chemical taste in my mouth only intensified making me grimace. I tried to swallow the water, but it was like trying to swallow mud. Almost impossible. Do all the infected have this aftertaste?

I shiver after I manage to get some water into me but spit the rest out. I hope that I can at least eat something like a normal person at this point. Shaking my head, I climb down and head out into the closest patch of trees I saw. It should only take an hour or so to get there, but I did pull my leg and arm when I almost fell to my death, so I had a slight, almost unnoticeable limp.

Stretching as I begin to walk, I try to notice any new or weird feelings in my body. The tingle in my fingers and this cold feeling were definitely new as I never felt this cold in summer. The wind was also irritating my eyes a lot, I never had problems with dry eyes until now.

By the time I stop thinking about what could be happening I reached the patch of trees, so with new hope I try to find any source of water or food. I might go hunting today and smoke some meat for the upcoming days.

With a plan in mind, I start carefully looking around and trying to make as little noise as I can while stepping over logs and branches. A rabbit would be nice but knowing my luck lately I might find something bigger that would look at me as if I was the snack.

I spot a little white spot at the green foliage background. The little squirrel had no idea what was coming its way. Taking out the dull pocketknife I ready myself to go after it. I slowly walk closer as the small rodent ate something, probably some kind of nut or berries, I couldn't quite see it from this distance.
I hid behind a tree and peeked out, ready to run out and grab it before it saw me and started trying to attack me instead. Thats when I heard the loud high-pitched squeal, I recognized that sound from farms, but it wasn't a pig that ran out from some bushes, it was a massive boar. Giant white boar that ran directly at the squirrel, that unfortunately didn't have time to react as the boar bit it.

I hid back behind the tree, hoping that it wouldn't see me. I was no match with my dull pocketknife against a boar with tusks. Trying to breathe as quietly as possible I try to sneak away as the boar

occupied itself with eating. Luckily it wasn't me it was chewing.

I didn't get far as I heard the high-pitched squeal again and looked behind me to see the boar running at me.
,, Oh, debes estar bromeando!" I yelled in Spanish as I started sprinting away, towards anything I could climb to get away from the boar.

The boar was gaining at me so I decided that climbing the closest tree will be the best opinion. I ran up to a tree and started climbing through the branches and pines, that were stabbing at my face and unfortunately my hands, sending unpleasant shocks through my fingers. As I neared half point of the tree, I looked down to see the hog looking up at me. I thought that pigs were unable to look up, but this one decided to prove me wrong apparently.

Will it go away if I sit here long enough?
Groaning in frustration I decide that hiding in the branches and pines might be my only option, maybe it will get distracted with another animal or just give up. Looking through the branches I notice that the next tree is very close by, maybe I can jump over to another tree?
No, I won't risk it.

Waiting it is and since I will be up here for some time, I can check my bag. Since I started traveling, I was only taking out food or water, or hammock.

The hammock was on the top of the backpack, so I let it sit there while I looked inside. The two water bottles, one empty and one half full. The compass and the old map as well as the diary. Some plastic bags and the note from Cooper. On the very bottom I found my dead phone, but now it was slightly cracked. It must have gotten damaged along the way, not to say I wasn't careful with the bag.

If I find a way to charge it, I might be able to contact Eva, but finding a working outlet could prove to be rather hard. I heard of solar phone chargers, but I have no idea how they look, or where to get them. With a sigh I put everything back and just sit there as the

boar gradually loses interest.

It started circling the tree, sometimes leaving and then coming back, until it must have left for good as I haven't seen it for almost half an hour. Finaly climbing down I look around and when the coast is clear make a run for it.
If my life keeps going downhill like that, I might start to think that life hates me.

I kept walking until I saw what I was looking for, a stream. It was deeper than I thought at first glance, and I could see a faint shadow of a fish swimming slowly downstream. This might have solved two problems at once for me, not only I have water but also food.

The boar might be around, so I don't think that making a fire here is a good idea or maybe it will get scared of the flames if it shows up? No, I doubt it will come here, I walked some good distance, and I went in the other direction the boar went.

I gathered a few sticks and branches, one longer and rather straight stick was put aside, and I started to make the fire to boil water. Hopefully I will manage to catch at least one fish with the stick I put aside, after I sharpen it of course.

When the flames were big enough that they didn't need constant care, I filled the pot and let it sit next to the fire, and the plastic handles will most likely start melting. If they do, I will definitely smell the burning plastic.

Using the dull pocketknife, I start sharpening the stick until it had a pretty sharp point, then I made smaller cuts in the sides so the fish wouldn't slip, hopefully it won't. With one look at the fire, I added a few small sticks to it and took off my shoes and socks. I pulled my pants slightly up to not get them wet before stepping in the cold water. The slimy rocks made me slightly uncomfortable but at least I didn't slip, yet.

I noticed the swimming shadow of the fish and stayed as still as possible, hoping that the fish will get closer. When the fish swam next to me, I stabbed the water with so much force that I lost

balance on the slippery rocks. With a gasp I felt the cold water hit my face as I fell.

Sitting up I scowl and check the stick to find no fish at all. Catching fish with a fishing rod was way easier than this. With a calming breath I get up and look for another fish. When the fish swam closer, I stab into the water again and actually hit the fish. Shocked that it actually worked I try to grab the fish before it could squirm off the stick, I should have made the grooves sharper.

Victouriosly bringing the fish on land I notice the foul burnt smell of plastic. Running towards the fire I pull the pot away from the flames with the non-melted handle. The water was simmering but not yet boiling and the other handle was completely melted off, leaving only steel part of the handle.

Well, since it already burned off, I might as well let it finish boiling. Adding a few more sticks into the fire I start preparing the fish. I knew how to gut it and smoking it would be the best option. I'm not the greatest cook, not even a good one, but how hard can be smoking one fish right?

I gather as much fallen leaves and needles as I could find and put them next to the fire, after that I make the small rack from some sticks and string I have. The fish was cut in half and the head was chopped off. I don't like when my food looks at me.

When the water started boiling, I slid it to the side so it could cool off. Now it's time to smoke the fish. Adding the leaves and needles I enjoyed the smell of the smoke as I put the fish over it. This day might not be so bad after all.

Grabbing my half empty water bottle, I take a sip and instantly spit it out. The chemical teste was back and made my eyes tear up from the intensity. I almost forgot about it. A shiver shook my body as I try to drink the water. There was still half a day left before camp so I might catch some more fish, after I dry off some. My clothes were still wet, but I guess that a bath wouldn't hurt. I'm surprised that animals still try to attack me when I smell worse than a dumpster.

I give up on drinking water for now and decide to watch over the fire as the flames can't get too big. Taking a deep breath, I look over to the sunlight that was coming down from between all the branches and greenery. The forest looked serene.

Chapter 18

When I thought that those shivers and chemical aftertaste were bad, I didn't know what was coming.

After three days my symptoms only got worse, and I had to find shelter as I couldn't walk anymore. I found a cemetery and something that once was a church, I think. This place looks abandoned but provided shelter for me.
And I needed it.

I try to find my water bottle through the blurry vision that I had to blink away all the time. The burning sensation in my eyes was almost painful and caused tears to slide down my face all the time.

Once I blinked away most of the blurry vision, I spot my bottle and reach for it. Luckily for me there was a lake nearby.
A gasp escaped me when another wave of painful cramps contracted my muscles.

I only experienced muscle spasm twice in my life before, but compared to this, those were just a joke.
It was so painful that I let go of the bottle and it rolled off the roof.

Deeply breathing I wait for the pain to pass. The massive headache wasn't helping in this situation as well.
Once the cramps let go and I finally didn't feel like my muscles were trying to burst, I slowly crawl towards the edge of the roof and look below me.

Luckily the plastic bottle didn't spill the water inside or looked damaged, I think. Now I will need to get it back.

Using the debris from the collapsed part of the roof, I climb down and retrieve the bottle. Taking a big gulp of water, I make a face when the chemical after-taste returns, it was weaker than before but still present.

For the past week I'm stuck on this cemetery in the middle of nowhere and the symptoms only seem to get worse. I don't see myself travelling whit those muscle spasms. This place was literary in the middle of an overgrown field.

Since I was already down here, I could go and get more water and maybe find a rabbit or any other critter.

I was close to a fort. I had to be.
The number of gunshots I heard and the number of cars driving in the distance was unsettling. I know that they have to hunt, and they also are looting but it was just uncomfortable, even more now that I was clearly infected.

Walking in the direction of the lake I try to spot anything edible, but for now there were only birds.
I also noted the darkening clouds ahead, the wind was blowing towards me so it might start raining.

Once I arrive at the lake, I get my water bottle and fill it up, I will boil the water once at the camp.

I can feel tears sliding down my cheeks even though my eyes feel like dry desert. It was extremely annoying for some reason.

With a deep sigh I go back towards the camp.
Catching fish in water this deep is just impossible and I didn't have a fishing rod.
I still had some smoked fish, but I doubt it was edible after eleven days.

I stop as I feel the cramps coming back, slowly sinking to my knees I groan and grip the long grass. Trying to regulate my breathing and calm down I feel the pounding in my head only worsen.

After what felt like eternity the cramps eased up, allowing me to stand up and walk. When I finally reach the crumbling church, I look for dry planks from the debris.

The only trees around were some miles away where I suspected the fort to be. And from my experience I know that larger animals will

likely swarm around the forts.

Once I have enough fuel for the fire, I retrieve the pot and flint and steel. I could cook a mushroom stew as I found some and dried them, but with my skills it could end up as a mushroom tasting water or overcooked mushroom mush. I'm starting to regret not learning how to cook.

Deciding that it was better trying than not doing anything I grab the pot, the dried mushroom slices and the water I just got.
I checked the fish meat, and it looks like dried up piece of bark.
Maybe I used too much salt.

I start by boiling the water and look around for any edible greens, if I remember correctly then dandelions are edible.
I look around the graveyard and then look in the overgrown field.
By the time I'm back I have quite a handful of dandelions.

I set them aside as I don't see a point in boiling them and put the mushrooms in the simmering water.
As I reach for the meat another wave of tremors and cramps contracted my muscles.

I wait till my muscles ease up and grab the meat, checking it once again to make sure it was edible before throwing half of it into the pot. While waiting for the 'stew', I eat the dandelions, even though the stems were bitter and earthy.

Before I checked the stew, I got one more cramp. I don't think I can ever get used to cramps like this. It felt like my whole body just refused to work.

I slide the pot off the weak flames and let it cool off for a while, before tasting it.
Like I thought, my cooking skills are as bad as ever.
The salty water with slight mushroom taste was edible but it definitely wasn't fit for a restaurant or a family table.

The slimy mushrooms were extremely unpleasant to eat, it just felt like I was swallowing snails, but the meat lost some of the saltiness and came up good, if I can say so myself.

By the time the pot was halfway empty I was full, so I covered the top with my second shirt and thought about bringing it on top of the roof.
But I could barely climb the debris without slipping, I also don't know when the spasms will come back to haunt me.

I decided to leave the pot below some larger planks and hoped that my shirt was enough to keep bugs away from the stew.
Climbing back up I made myself as comfortable as possible. I might enjoy myself till the massive headache and cramps make their reappearance.

My vision was still rather blurry and unfocused, stinging every once in a while. Playing with my longer hair I realize that I haven't trimmed it in a long time. My eyes drift to my locks, and the colorful shapes confuse me for a second.
My hair was always darker brown, but now I saw a dirty blonde.

I try to clear the blurriness from my eyes and when I see a little more clearly, I check my hair again.
It was really dirty blond, I wear it in a ponytail, so I didn't notice it before.
But it makes sense, every infected I met had white hair.

Now I wonder if my blood is also changing to that color, or if my vision is so blurry because I'm going blind, but every infected, animal or human, seemed like they could see me normally.

I looked at my past injuries, but each one I had was too old to just scratch the scab off, if I want to see my blood, I will need to cut myself.

Shaking my head, I watched the sun slowly travel across the sky, since the dark clouds were getting closer, I might as well set up the tarp.

Taking the tarp and tying the corners to the splintered wood that was once a tower of the church I created a little roof. It wasn't perfect as I might still get a little wet, but it was the best I could do right now.

I sat down and drank some water before taking the compass and finding east, I was still headed towards Eva, even though I had no idea where exactly she was or if she was even alive or inside that fort.

I hope she's fine.

A white blob in the distance caught my eyes, it was small and slowly moving across the field.
Whatever it is, it isn't headed here, luckily.

I can't really see how big it is or how far away it is. For now, it was just a moving white blob on the green background of grass. Whatever that was, it was moving away from the fort direction, deciding to wait till this animal gets closer for me to recognize it.

Waiting as well as staying hidden, I watch as the blob get larger, until I'm certain that I can see what it actually is. I try to clear my vision and wipe the tears away with my sleeve. By the time I could see more than just shapes and colors I finally spot what was walking in the distance.

,,Oh, Estoy muerta" I mutter and try to hide even more and conceal my existence as much as possible. A bear. Of all the possible animals I could encounter, it has to be a bear.
I peek slightly to see if it's still going away and that's when I feel the tremors attack my muscles again. Of all the possible times it happens now?!

I try to breath as calmly and quietly as my body would allow me, while watching the bear slowly change its course and head towards me.
Thats it, I'm dead.

By the time it made its way towards the broken wooden fence the tremors let go and I crawled out of sight. Its heavy breathing made me shake as I covered my mouth and nose to mute my breathing. The bear slowly sniffed around below me, and it must have pushed something as some planks fell down. I just hope that it isn't trying to get up here, but for now I listened intently for the noise it was making. Surprisingly for how large this bear was it made little to no

noise, or maybe I was just completely deaf.

It sounded as if it was huffing and, was it eating? What could it be eating?

I jumped slightly in realization; I left the leftover stew below. Well, that bear can have it as long as it will leave me alone.
Sitting in complete silence I wait for the animal to walk away, occasionally hearing the huffs of the bear it feels like I wait several hours but in reality, it had to be just minutes.
A thunder booms in the distance as the sky darkens with the slowly setting sun. The bear huffs some more before it goes completely silent, but I'm not sure if it's safe to come out yet. I never had to deal with a wild bear. Waiting some more I listen to the coming rain, the thunder isn't the most reassuring, as I'm sitting outside under a tarp on a crumbling roof of a church. Barely able to see, almost deaf on one ear and having muscle cramps randomly.

Not the ideal situation to be in right now.
Im starting to doubt my confidence in getting to Eva in one piece by myself, but at the same time I refuse to give up. If I die, it's Cocoguy's fault, not mine.
I can feel more tears slide down my cheeks as the rain slowly starts hitting the tarp in almost rhythmic manner.

I pull my knees to my chest and hug myself as I watch the world darken as the sun disappears behind the horizon. The rain slowly picks up and before long the rain falls from the sky in a constant manner. The lightning flashes across the dark sky illuminating the fog that appeared after the sun's disappearance.
I observe the flashes of lighting as my eyes slowly close. I don't expect much sleep tonight, but the rhythmic pounding of rain lulls me to sleep.

I flinch awake when a sharp pain pulses in my head. With a groan I slowly sat up with a yawn, rubbing my eyes as I try to focus my vision. I lost count how many times I woke up during the night, I was either cold or in pain. The rain stopped sometime during the

night, but the gray clouds still hung above me.

Once I cleared the blurriness away, I scanned the area, there's a lot of mud, but not a sigh of the bear, luckily. I will have to check on the pot, if I even still have it.
My muscles suddenly convulsed as another set of cramps made me shook with pain. This is not going to be easy.

Chapter 19

The past two weeks were the worst days of my life. Being in constant pain and unable to see most of the time was not fun at all, not to mention the cramps. I was glad that I don't have those anymore, well, most of the time at least.
Usually I wake up with the blurry vision, but it goes away after a minute or so and the cramp turned to mild, dull ache.

I observe the houses in front of me in attempt to spot any threats. After what happened last time, I want to be more careful. So here I was, sitting for almost one entire hour just watching the streets from the tree line.
The vast flat fields were finally over, and I could see something more than just grass, but at the same time it was easier to spot dangers.

Taking a deep breath, I head over to the houses in the distance and hope to find some tin cans. Eating meat and weeds all the time was becoming rather bothering for me. I wouldn't mind even something sweet.
Reaching the first house I look for the broken windows but all of them are intact to my surprise.

I doubt that I have the strength to break a window, and even if I had the strength I would hate to walk around with a broken hand. Looking at the door I try the handle and pull, it opens with a creak and all the dust swirls in the sunlight. I slowly step inside and look around, the fog was as usual hiding under the furniture and in the darkest corners, but at this point I didn't care.

With no threat in sight, I head towards the closest room, which appears to be a bedroom. I instantly checked the light switch, but as expected it didn't work. The thought of charging my phone was scrapped.

New clothes are always a welcome, so I open the wardrobe and 'borrowed' some shirts. The pants are too long. Stuffing them in my

bag I made my way towards another door, but it led to a garage. I will come back there later.

The white floor of the kitchen was a welcome sight. Since this place hasn't show any indication of being looted before, I had high hopes to find useful items. Not bothering with the fridge, I went straight towards the cupboards and open all of them, searching for a knife and hopefully a knife sharpener.
The steak knife was the first thing I claimed and then focused on other useful items.

The package with the bread definitely did not contain bread, it looked like gray and green moss. If that ever comes out it will spread a plague. My interest is caught by a can of tomato soup in the other corner.

,,Oh, finally normal food" I cheered slightly as I grab the can with a small jump of happiness. This is what I was looking for and maybe there's more somewhere hidden. Opening another shelf, I find pots and pans, since I have those, I move to another shelf until I check every corner of the kitchen.

When I'm certain that I won't find anything else I move on to the next room, which seems to be a small library. Books upon books crammed in this small room, the smell was also pleasant, but slightly musky. I might come back to this room as well later, when I'm sure that I won't be taking anything else.

When there's nothing worth taking left in this house, I move to the next one. There's a row on each side of the street and then there is a lone house further away. It might be a good idea to loot as much as possible, since it seems like nobody was here since the fog spread.

I search all the houses I can get into and then move towards the last one. It may be a good idea to sleep in one of the houses for the night. If I close the doors and barricade, then no animals should get inside, and the fog shouldn't be a problem anymore. I think.

Quickly searching the house, I find some more canned food and a bedroom. I will come back here after I search the house off the road. It was slowly getting darker, and I wanted to heat up the soup

before it got too dark to see.

As I walk out of the abandoned building I head towards the furthest house. It was fairly big and looked like a mansion. As I reach for the handle, I spot a flock of birds in the corner of my eye. There was around 50 or 60 of them.

All then hurriedly flew away and into the distance.
Opening the door, I was met with another pitiful case of a forgotten pet.
The smell was no better.

I step over the dead dog and start searching the rooms. There are some more expensive things here like Golden watches and rings, but those are rather useless, but eye catching.

Next room is filled with paintings and pictures, the white walls are covered in them. Either the person living here was an artist or they just liked to collect paintings.

Not bothering with the colorful room, I walk down a hallway and find myself in the bedroom.

The bed was unkempt and the window slightly open, allowing some fresh air inside. There are some chargers and other cables as well as a computer, I grab the pile of chargers and stuff them in my pocket.

Electricity might not work anymore, but I might use the cables for small repairs if I run out of rope and string.
I didn't bother with clothes as I collected enough of them in the previous houses, so I walked out and headed back towards the house I will be staying at tonight.

Surprisingly there were little to no animals around, I saw a raccoon yesterday but let it be, but since then it is fairly quiet. Even rats are nowhere to be seen.

Arriving back inside, I leave most of the items next to the bed before grabbing the can of soup and going outside.
No one was living here anymore but that wasn't a reason to start a fire.

I collect some sticks and twigs and start a small fire on the road. I let the flames grow as I try to open the can without spilling the soup.
It is not easy.

I push down on the can with my pocketknife and manage to make a hole. Hopefully it is big enough. I wiggle the blade some more and by the time the fire is nicely burning I have the soup in the pot.

I leave the pot next to the flames and occupy myself with sorting my findings inside. There were several chargers, some canned food and a bag of chips. A small water bottle and a wrench.

Why did I take a wrench? I have no idea. It might come in handy someday.

By the time I remember about the pot the soup was simmering. I borrow a spoon from the house and enjoy the warm meal as the sun began to set.

I made sure that the doors were secured before making myself cozy in the bed. I forgot how comfortable beds can be.
Before I realized it, I was asleep.

The day came far too quickly as I had to pack up and leave. Deciding that walking in the forest might be the fastest way East I did just that.

Even without a map I'm doing rather good but finding the fort might be just the hardest task.

I jump over a tree trunk covered in moss and spot a bunch of mushrooms under it. Unfortunately, I have no idea if those are edible, so I left them alone.

I didn't even make one step before falling completely still.
I thought that there are no forts around here. There is no noise or sign of life and yet, a wall is standing there.

The lack of any noise coming from it made me think that it could be

abandoned.
But why would anyone abandon a fort and why is it in the middle of the forest.

Other forts I have seen were in a clearing or a field, next to a river.
Curiosity got the better of me, so I slowly approached the welded steel sheets that towered over me.

Looking both ways, I didn't see where the wall turned.
I looked up but it would be impossible to climb over.

But the trees around should be tall enough to let me see what was beyond this wall.
I climbed the nearest pine tree, almost falling when a branch broke, and looked over the wall.

I was confused even more.
Just the forest. It looks like someone built a wall in the middle of a forest and forgot about it.

Or maybe they were trying to build a fort but ran out of time and the fog came.

I look for the opening in the wall from the tree before climbing back down and going along it.
I was just curious what this was doing here.

As I finally reached a corner, I spot two trees that are right next to the wall. So, I climbed and jumped over on the other side.

Looking around I start wandering through the forest, searching for any sign of life, but this place seems dead for some reason.

I spot something shiny in a bush nearby, so I head over there to investigate.

The shiny object was bigger than I anticipated and had cables running from it to the top of the tree.

What is a machine doing in a place like that?
Before I could even leave the machine came to life as it started spilling thick, white smoke.

A smoke machine? In the middle of the forest?
What is going on?

Chapter 20

I walk around the machine and the cable that leads towards a tree and then up. I was intrigued to say the least.
It definitely raises questions for me.
What is it doing here? What was it for and who put it here?

It definitely had power since some red led light blinks ever so often.
I eye the cables that lead up a tree and started to climb said tree.
Once I reached the top a surprising sight greets me.
Solar panel secured to a branch, with the branches and leaves cleared above it.

I get down and decide to scout the area.
Walking to the side I'm met with just trees, shrubs and bushes.
No signs of life.

Shaking my head, I head towards the wall. This place had to be a fort, but they probably didn't manage to build it before the fog came.
As I reach the machine once more, I look for a button or a switch.
Since it has power, I may at least find out what it was for.

I spot a button next to the flashing red light and press it. The machine comes to life and within a second, a thick white smoke comes out of it. There was so much of it in such a short time I panicked and turned it off again.

Staring at it with furrowed eyes I get up and start heading towards the wall.
As I catch a glimpse of the wall, I hear a rustle of some branches and leaves.

I stop and observe the foliage on my left side. It feels like eternity until I hear another rustle and a human with a white, dirty rag covering their face emerges from the shrubs.

As they come into view, they stop and look at me. They also go

completely still.
This gives me the opportunity to see the firearm they carried and make my decision.

In seconds I turn around and sprint away.

,,Hey! Get back here!"
The male voice shouted as the person gave chase.

I run towards the machine and then swiftly climb up the tree. As I reach the top the thuds of my pursuer footsteps get louder.
As I watch him pass the tree and listen to his footsteps getting further away, I relax slightly.

Waiting another minute just in case I then climb down and head towards the wall. I reach the tall, steel fence and look for the tree I used to get in.

As I search, I hear thuds behind me, but before I can react, I feel weight push me to the ground. Knocking me off my feet and pushing me to the ground.
My mind instantly flashes to the feral woman from the town and I panic.

,,Gotcha!" The voice of the man with the rag over his face sounds behind me as he puts most of his weight on me, preventing me from escaping.

,,Wait! Let me go!" I scream as I try to wiggle out, but he rips my bag of my back and pulls my hand behind me.
,,Stop squirming." He growls as he ties my hands and pulls me up.
,,If you don't cooperate, I'll shoot you."
He starts pushing me while holding my arms with one hand and pushing his gun to my back with the other.
,,Start walking."

Not wanting to get shot I do as he says, but I glance behind me only to see that he left my backpack on the ground. The only thing I had on me is the pocketknife and my compass.

He drags me through the forest until my legs are sore and we enter

a clearing where plenty of people tended to crops and animals, as well as another wall with five watchtowers spread unevenly across it.

A fort.

People were freely tending to the crops outside the steel fence and some sheep were grazing on the grass as well. When the people saw the man leading me, they all stopped and whispered among each other.
Some even ran inside.

As we neared the entrance a young man with dirty blond hair started walking towards us. He is wearing a white robe with some red embroidery on the short sleeves and the hem. A red cloth wrapped around his waist.
He is accompanied by three other people.

One of them was medium height and is wearing a military uniform while the other two had the same white rag covering their faces as the man leading me.

They stopped right in front of us, and the military guy looked at the man behind me. ,,Report." He huffed as he glared at me.

,,Found her in the woods near the secondary wall." He obediently said. ,,She saw 'it'."

This made the man frown even more and the 'guards' shift behind him. While the guy wearing all white stood silently, slightly to the side with neutral expression.
The military man looks around and when he sees that no one is close he turns towards the guy in white.

,,Do your thing Saviour, then come to my office." He then turns towards the guard on his left. ,,Take some men and go check the perimeter, make sure there are no more 'visitors' and check on 'it'."

The guard answered with a quick 'yes sir' and the military man with the other guard left.
The guy called Saviour smiled slightly and turned towards the fort.

He spread his arms and shouted, looking at the people who stood there.
,,Brothers! Sisters! Look!" He said loudly but ever so slowly. ,,We were sent a lamb to help us in this time of need!"
The Saviour guy turned back to me.

,,We are so glad you showed up here. My Brothers and Sisters call me Saviour." He looked up with closed eyes and continued. ,,I'm the chosen one. The one that became the bridge between earth and the one above, who sent a demon to punish the wrongdoers and the unfaithful ones."

I stare at the man with slightly open mouth.
,,What?"

His arms fell a little and he opens his eyes, while putting his weight on one of his legs.
,,Just call me Saviour." He looks at the guard. ,,Escort the girl."

The guard pushes me from behind and I barely manage to catch myself. As I walk inside the fort a lot of people stare at me and some whisper between each other.

As I walk the streets of the fort, I notice that the population looks small, I saw forts from a distance that had more people tending to the crops outside than this place had inside. Some people are wearing dirty clothes while others look famished.

The wall had a platform where several people stood, all of them wearing the white cloth around their face and carrying some kind of weapon. The watchtowers have some guards as well.

The man shoved me inside a small building, the long hallway holds several doors, and the guard opens one and drags me inside.
He finally releases me from his grip and unties my hands before shutting the door close behind him. I hear the lock close, and his footsteps slowly fade away.

,,Hey!" I slam my shoulder against the door. ,,Let me out!"

What the heck is happening. What was that guy even talking about?

I look around for a way to escape. The windows had bars on them and a cloth, making the room dim. The room was otherwise bare, not even a light bulb.
I try to pull open the door again, but it didn't budge.

This is bad.

By the time I managed to open every window and check every bar some hours went by, and I'm met with the sound of the door unlocking.
In comes the Saviour and one of the guards.

He smiles and turns towards the guard. ,,Wait outside."
The guard walks out without a word and closes the door.
There is a moment of silence as I stare at the guy, and he looks around the room in silence.

,,May I know your name?" He starts. ,,So, I can address you properly at least."
His way of speech completely changed. Before he was speaking slowly, as if he had to think before saying each word. Now he speaks as if we were old friends, meeting after years.

I take a step back and eye the door, the guard didn't lock it. Maybe if I run fast enough, I may be able to get out.

,,Hey." He steps between me and the door. ,,Can you talk?"

I take several deep breaths to clear my head but only give him a nod.

,,Okay, can you tell me your name?" He fiddles with his fingers.

I swallow the lump in my throat before finally managing to murmur. ,,Xiomara."

He blinks slowly and shifts his weight on one of his legs.
,,Okay, that's a pretty difficult name to pronounce."

,,What will you do with me." I ask, my voice almost cracking at the end.

He scratches his head and looks away, huffing and groaning under his breath. A little unusual for someone in a white robe, who looks like he escaped a fantasy movie casting.

,,How do I say it. Since you saw something, you shouldn't see, the leader wants you gone before you say anything to the other people."

Is that it?
,,Then let me go. I don't want trouble." Taking one small step forward. ,,I was just passing by. I will leave and you won't see me again."

He opens his mouth but closes it right after, his eyes squinting right at me, and his brows lifted ever so slightly.
,,If it was up to me." He points with both of his hands at himself. ,,I would love to do that. But I'm not in charge here."

He takes a step forward and quietly says. ,,Listen kid. Just stay in this room for three days, then I will come, take you and lead you to the entrance of the fort, then I will just cut your hand a little, show your blood to the people and then lead you away."

I frown and swallow. Something wasn't right.
,,Why do you want to show my blood."

He smiled with closed eyes before turning and walking towards the door. ,,One of the guards will stay with you at all times. Don't worry before you know it, it will be over."

He opens the door and with one last weak smile, walks out. I stare at it for some time before looking at the windows, I can't even see outside.
The door opens and in walks one of the guards. He stands next to the door and stares silently ahead.

There is no way I'll be able to overpower him, and he will catch me before I can even open the door.
I have no idea how to get out.

The room slowly got darker as the sun started to set. The guards

didn't move an inch the whole time.
I ended up sitting in the corner opposite of him, staring at the bare walls with chipped pastel green paint.

That guy said three days. If these days will be like today, I might go crazy and actually try to throw hands. It wasn't helping that I can't get comfortable with a guard in here with me, he could have stayed outside the room.

The door opens catching both of our attention. In walked another guard and they switch places.
I pull my knees towards me and hug myself as I try to decide if I should try to escape at night.

The new guard was taller and bulkier than the previous one, so I didn't even think about getting past him.
With a sigh I look at the door. It was getting darker, and the room slowly dimmed with the disappearing light.

,,Hey."

I jump at the sound and stare at the guard in confusion.
Even with the rag around his face I could see that he was looking at me.

,,Don't worry, I don't bite, unless I have to." He said and I could see through the darkness that he took off the rag.
,,I just want some information."

I stay silent for a few seconds before responding.
,,So, an interrogation?" I question and try to see his movement in the darkness.

,,No, not like that." He chuckles dryly. ,,Just som-"
He starts whispering and even in this silence it's too quiet for me to catch what he said.

Not knowing if he was still talking or not, I speak up.
,,I can't hear you when you whisper."

The silence continues before he speaks up again.
,,Can you move closer? I don't want to talk too loudly as somebody

could hear."

Instantly feeling unsettled I shake my head.
He may not see me do that, but my silence and no movement answered for me.

,,Listen, if I wanted to hurt you, I would have done so already. I just want some information since you're not from here."

I still don't move and listen to his movements as well as try to spot any from the darkness.

,,If you need help, I can guide you." His tone turned softer.

Staring at the darkness I slowly get up and move against the opposite wall from him, before sitting in the corner.

He was silent for a solid minute before introducing himself.
,,I'm Jason and you are?"

,,Xiomara." Before he could speak again, I quickly questioned.
,,What's happening here?"

Jason grunted.
,,Nothing good." He leaned on the wall behind him before speaking quietly. ,,The guy you met today, the one in the robe. He says that he is some kind of a Saviour or a chosen one and believe me when I say that he is bad news."

I realized that when he came to talk with me earlier.

Jason leaned forward.
,,But the thing I want to ask you. What's happening?"

I blink in confusion.
,,You're asking me? I'm the one closed in a room with no ide-"

,,No, no." He cuts me off. ,,I mean outside. The situation of the world and stuff."

That baffled me even more. Couldn't he see the fog?
The realization hit me a second later. This fort has two walls.

,,You mean on the other side of the wall?"

,,Yes." He nodded.

,,Well." I start. ,,The Fog is still there."
What else could he want? I don't know what kind of information he wants.

,,So that fog is real?" He says in a shocked tone. ,,I don't understand."

,,What? you never saw it? Not even a glimpse?" I question.

He laughs quietly and answers.
,,It seems like I did."

Okay I'm getting more confused as we talk.
,,Have you ever seen the infected animals or people?"

He is silent before stepping closer, making me shrink back.
,,Infected?"

I nod even if I'm not sure if he saw the action.

,,Infected?" He leans back, looking to the side. ,,What you mean by that?"

,,When somebody touches the fog, they get infected. All animals are, except your apparently." I explain and wait for him as he stands there without a word.

,,Looks like he lies after all." He mumbles. ,,He said that the fog kills instantly."

,,It doesn't? It spreads in darkness and glows slightly. It's easy to recognize as it is teal in color."
I explain as I have a feeling, we are talking about something else.
,,Is it the same fog we are talking about? You said that you saw it?"

,,No." He laughs, taking me aback.
,,It seems it is not."

He wraps the cloth around his face once more.
,,I don't know what kind of Voodoo that creep is doing but now I know why they want to get rid of you."

I stare blankly at him in the darkness.
,,Get rid of me as if-"

,,Do you have any proof?" Jason cuts me off again.

,,Proof?"

,,Yes, proof. If we want to stop that creep, we need proof for people. I tried before, but it didn't end well. Without proof, Saviour will keep lying to people and you will end up dead."

I stare ahead of me before slowly turning towards him.
,,That's not what he said to me." Surprisingly my voice is trembling.
,,He said that after three days he will come, cut my hand and-"

And what? Lead me away where, or to do what?

,,Cutting your hand and showing your blood to the people, right? That his way of showing the sacrifice."

A shiver ran through my spine at the word sacrifice.

Jason continued.
,,He says that blood of sinners repels the demonic fog and only he and he alone is immune as the 'bridge between us and the one above'. He will cut your hand and drop a few drops of blood in front of the gate and then lead you away with several guards and well, I guess kill you."

I bury my head in my knees and pull slightly at my hair. There must be a way out.

,,What kind of cult is this." I mumble and look up.
,,Wait, you talked about a fog and that this guy is immune."

,,Yes."

,,But his hair is blonde, not white." I mutter to myself. Unless he

isn't infected for long, but then he wouldn't call himself immune or maybe he actually is immune?

,,What does that have to do with being immune?" Jason questions.

,,When someone touches the fog, they get infected. Their hair turns white, even animals fur gets white, their eyes get clouded-"

He cuts me off again.
,,Wait, that means that you..." He scoffs and his clothes rustle as he moves lightly. ,,And here I thought that they captured a blind kid."

He wasn't wrong, but something didn't add up.
,,He said that I saw the 'it'."

,,Who?"

,,The guard that dragged me here and the man in the military outfit. They didn't seem surprised or even confused."
They know. They definitely know.

,,Chief huh? He is the one that dragged us here in the middle of the night and told us about the 'Fog that kills instantly'. Almost every guard is from his military group." He stayed silent for a second before continuing.
,,What did you see?"

,,Ehh, The second wall? The machines?"

,,Machines?" Jason wondered. ,,My shift ends in the morning, I will go sneak around and try to find those machines. Are they hidden or concealed somehow?"

,,No, they're just a little far."

,,Okay, get some rest." He said and suddenly the silence continued. I just pulled my legs closer and closed my eyes.

,,She doesn't look that different." I was woken up with a new voice.
,,She just has white hair."

,,If you heard the same stuff, I did last night. John, she is the proof we need." Jason answered the newcomer.

I open my eyes and look at the two guys. Jason still had the rag around his face and the other named John looked young, maybe the same age as me.

John scratches his head. ,,Dude, we tried. Let's just figure out how to get her out of this mess."

,,And what?" Jason snorted. ,,Watch as one of our friends are sacrificed instead? I think it's better to take our chances and finally stop it."

I watch as they bicker between each other until John looks at me and jumps, grabbing his shirt, going slightly pale, with a gasp.

,,For the love of-" He took a shaky breath. ,,That scared me."
He took several breaths until looking at me again.
,,Sorry about it." He smiled and continued. ,,Brought you some food."

,,Oh, thank you." I'm taken aback when he pulls out a container with some scrambled eggs and a piece of bread.

,,No need to thank me." he smiles. ,,Jason wasn't kidding when he said that you look blin- I mean..."

I shake my head and take the container he is offering. ,,Its okay. I was confused too when I saw an infected person for the first time."

Jason pats John on his shoulder.
,,Kid, this is John, a talented golden-handed boy, and a master talker. He can fix anything."
John looks away with a grimace.

,,John, this is... Sao..." He looks at me as if waiting for me to finish.

,,Xiomara." I correct him.

,,Yes, that. She can be our missing component."

John frowns and shakes his head. ,,And how exactly are you planning on pursuing the people? In two days the 'demonic fog' will come and then it will be too late."

,,What if it doesn't come?" I pipe in. ,,You could break the machines. Then- wait, how do you know when it will come? If they tell you then..."

,,Saviour says that he has visions where the 'one above' tells him when it will come." John explains and then motions to my food. ,,Eat, I need to take the box and leave in a while, before they will ask where I was."

With a nod I take a mouthful and groan at the taste. I forgot how good, scrambled eggs were.

John smiles proudly but then turns towards Jason. ,,How do you even want to sneak past the guards? They don't let anyone in the forest except the Saviour and few chosen guards."

,,I have my plan, don't worry." Jason then turned to me. ,,But first."

I look up from my almost finished breakfast.

,,Let's make a deal." He says seriously. ,,We help you get out of here alive, and you help us stop that maniac group. Deal?"

What else can I choose? Sit here and die?

I nod.
,,Deal."

Chapter 21

Sitting in one room for hours with nothing to do was making me restless.
The guards changed every so often, maybe every four hours.
John had to leave before the new shift came and Jason said that he will try to come back in the evening before he left.

It was now a waiting game for me, which was very annoying and uncomfortable. The light that managed to get through the covered windows slowly dimmed with every minute and if tomorrow I won't get
out I might just try attacking the guard.
Hopefully it won't be Jason as I can't tell them apart with those rags around their heads.

The door opens with a guard to take the next shift of watching the wall in silence. Seriously, do they really have to stay in the same room as me?

I notice how slimmer and slightly shorter the guard is. Good to know that even women can be guards, but it doesn't really help me.

With a sigh I lean my head back against the wall and stare at the ceiling. Looks like another several hours of silence to me.

Movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention and I look at the woman. She waved her arm slowly but the second I looked at her, she stiffens.

,,Wow, Jason wasn't lying about you." She lifted the rag slowly until her dark brown eyes became visible. ,,Your eyes really are clouded."

I sit straight. She knows Jason.
,,And you are?" I ask.

She smiles. ,,Linda. I'm more curious what's your name though. Jason said 'Sionara' or something"

A small laugh escapes me as I can't hold it back. He tried.
,,Its Xiomara. Or Xio."

She grins even more. ,,He is horrible with names. There's this one girl here, her name is Mireille, and he just can't remember it. So, he calls h- wait I'm getting distracted again. He sends a message that the 'plan' is in motion and that 'it' will happen today."

I blink in confusion.
,,What plan? And what's it?"

,,He didn't tell you, did he?" Linda snickers. ,,Thats so like him. Once he-"

,,Wait." I cut her off. ,,What plan?"

,,Oh right." She shakes her head. ,,Sorry. So, he will go and find those machines you told him about and turn them on and since the mist will come, they will probably take you out today for the sacrifice."

Her smile fell as she glances at me. ,,Which is not that good now that I think about it."

I bite my cheek and look at the door. ,,any chance of me escaping before that?"

She shakes her head. ,,The guards will shoot you down before you can make it to the woods. No one is allowed to enter the forest except Saviour, William and Nelson."

,,Who are they?" I ask in curiosity at the new information.

,,You met them already? You know, Chief and his second in command?"

,,The military man?" I mumble to myself, and she nods energetically.

,,Correct! That's William Mayers, also known as Chief. His second in command is Nelson Dean, also known as Nelson." She suddenly rummages through her pockets and takes out a paper bag. ,,Almost forgot! This is for you, John said that you may be hungry, so he gave you his rations."

It takes me aback. Rations? Do they have really that little food? Now that I think about it, some people looked starved.
,,He should eat it. If there's so little food then it bett-"
,,Oh don't worry. We have food, but we have to work for it. You get as much food as much work you do. John works a lot to get food for himself and his little brother Cody. So, take it. He insisted."

I swallow and get up. I will need to thank him later. I walk up to her and take the paper bag with a quiet 'thank you'.

Inside the bag are several pieces of dried meat and sliced carrots. My mouth waters and I bite into the salty jerky. Somehow it tastes a lot better than the one I make. Maybe it's because their animals aren't infected? Or maybe I'm just bad at making anything edible.

Me and Linda had a conversation as the hours pass by. She got distracted several times and jumped to other topics, leaving me to guess what happened in the unfinished stories.
I just wanted to know what happened to Brody after he jumped on the bull.

,,And after she finally found her ba-" Linda suddenly cuts off and turns her head towards the door. She covers her face with the rag, and I quickly jump up and run towards the furthest corner.

Linda looks forward as the door opens and in walks Chief, Saviour and I guess Nelson. Nelson motions his hand and Linda walks out, before she closes the door, she gives looks at me with a nod, that the three men miss.

The room falls into silence as they stare at me, and I stare at them. Saviour walks forward and claps his hands. ,,The time somehow comes faster than we thought."

,,Get up." Chief orders and when I stay motionless, he takes a threatening step closer. ,,I said. Stand. Up."

Not wanting to get into more trouble I do as he says, and Nelson moves behind me, roughly tying my hands behind my back.

,,Why are you doing that?" I ask, staring at the Chief.

He grunts and Saviour takes a step back. ,,Because to have power, you need to have control."

So it is all about having power.
I look at Saviour. ,,And you?" I snort. ,,You want to be worshipped? How did you even manage to convince so many people?"

Saviour looks away. Chief answers instead. ,,Camilo?" He snorts. ,,We made a deal, right Camilo?"
It wasn't a question, but a statement.
,,Also, convincing people is easy. We just put on a performance. A man dying, the second he touches the mist. In reality a sniper with a silencer." He smiles as if it was an achievement.

Saviour, or rather Camilo looks away and nods.

Chief walks over to him and growls. ,,I'm gathering the people. Bring her out in a bit."

,,Yes, Chief." Saviour nods and we all watch as Chief walks out of the room.

I send a glare at Camilo. ,,Crappy deal."

,,Hey!" He growls. ,,I didn't have much of a choice. It was either this or die."

Nelson snickers behind me. ,,Funny how you two had the same thing happen. Saw something you shouldn't."

,,So what? You just grabbed the first person who saw your machines?"

Nelson nods and pushes me forward.
,,If you both just stayed out of the forest." He opens the door.
,,Maybe your future would have looked brighter."

Saviour trudges behind us until we reach the door leading outside, that's when he takes the lead. And I'm being dragged along as we pass murmuring people who look worried and confused.

We near something resembling a stage that is built in front of an open gate, if I wanted, I could walk under it without having to crouch. I look outside at the clearing and the normal looking mist slowly floats around. It wasn't even close to the fort.

We walk up and stand before maybe a hundred people. Some guards are still on the walls patrolling, but it seems like almost the entire fort gathered here.

I look around for Jason or John, or even Linda but considering she's one of the guards I doubt I will recognize her.

Chief is already here, standing on the stage. Camilo goes in front and starts speaking in that slow manner he used before.

,,Therefore, now that we have been declared righteous as a result of faith, let us enjoy peace with The One Above, through whom we also have obtained access by faith into this undeserved kindness in which we now stand; and let us rejoice. Not only that, but let us rejoice while in tribulations, since we know that tribulation produces endurance; endurance, in turn, an approved condition; the approved condition, in turn, hope, and the hope does not lead to disappointment."

I have no idea what he is saying, but he pulls out a small, curved blade and turns to me.
,,I shall spill a drop of blood from the sacrificial lamb as proof of our faith."

He steps closer but stops instantly and his face twists with confusion as a small gasp escapes him.

Chief looks behind to see what is happening and his eyes fill with terror.

What is happening? Why are they behaving this way?

People below also start shouting and yelling to look at the forest. I glance behind me, and my stomach drops.
The fog. What is it doing here? Jason was supposed to activate the machines, not to let the real danger in!

I turn toward the Chief.
,,You have to close the gate! That fog will inf-"

,,Silence!" He growls. Glancing at the people he realizes his mistake, they heard us.
People start whispering among each other in hushed voices.

,,Brothers! Sisters! Don't let them deceive you! This must be a trick, that..." Saviour looks uncertainly at the teal fog that slowly edged closer to the city wall. ,,That is a trick. The true mist, you've seen what it does! You've seen how it killed that poor man!"

The people look uncertainly at their leader as murmuring between them grew louder.
,,William?" Nelson looks at him as well with rising urgency in his eyes. ,,What do we do?"

Chief sent Saviour a sharp glare and leans towards him. ,,You better fix this Camilo, or else I sacrifice you."

Saviour flinches and gives a small nod. ,,Brothers, Sisters. Why have my adversaries become so numerous? Why are so many rising up against me? Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, And trust in me! As long as the sacrifice is made, the salvation will come!"

The people shift and talk to one another, the whispers growing louder. Suddenly someone from the crowd yelled. ,,If this is the mist from the one above, walk in it Saviour! Show us that you're saying the truth!"

More people started shouting the same thing, they wanted proof. Looking around I try to find Jason, he was supposed to be here? Did something happen to him? I scan the crowd, but I can't find him. Where is he? It's the perfect time for him to tell the truth!

I find John and he looks around as well, then at me with worried expression. He starts pushing through the people and once he has more space he starts looking again.

If he doesn't tell them the truth...
Then I will.

,,They're lying to you! You don't need sacrifices!" I shout as loudly as I can.

The whispers grow even louder, and some people start yelling, wanting explanation.
I feel something press to my back and turn my head to notice Nelson. He was glaring and trembling slightly as he pressed the gun against my back. ,,You little-" He whispers but Chiefs cuts him out.

,,Quiet!" He shouts so loudly that even the herd of sheep in the pen stilled and looked up. ,,People! Don't you see? Shes pitting us against each other!"
He glared at Saviour as he passes him. ,,You live today because I saved you! I came and brought you here, where you are safe!"

,,If they're safe, why do you need someone like him." I nudge my head towards Camilo who takes a step back.

The gun digs painfully into my back as Nelson pulls my hands back. Chief turns to me and grabs a knife from his belt. ,,When I say to stay quiet." He growls. ,,You stay quiet!"

He glares into my eyes as he inches closer, the people starting to whisper again, even Nelson shifts behind me as he looks around, but still holds the gun.

,,Let her speak!" Someone shouts from the crowd.

Chiefs whips around and looks around the gathered people. ,,So she can lie to you?"

A middle-aged woman steps from the crowd forward. She is wearing an apron and a white shirt. She has wrinkles around her eyes and dark brown hair.
,,We want to know what this child has to say! Its suspicious that you're trying to make her stay quiet!"

Chief glared at the woman, and she held his gaze, slowly frowning at him.
,,She's telling the truth, isn't she?" The woman's eyes picked a challenging fire in them.

I look at Chief. He tenses up as his muscles go rigid, his shoulders rising with each deep breath he takes. The belt knife returns to his belt and his hands move to a gun holster, he slowly unclips it and takes out the handgun.

Eevryone falls into a deadly silence, until Camilo flinches and takes a step forward.
,,Brother." He says carefully. Chief doesn't look away from the people, so Savior continues.

,,We have come to know the bond of family, because that one surrenders their life for us, and we are under obligation to surrender our lives for our family." He slowly spread his hands as he looks at the members of this fort. ,, For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."
What is he saying? Even Chief looks rather taken aback.
,,Why do you complain against Chief? Is it because he did not answer all your words? You will call, and I will answer you. Trust in me at all times, O people. Pour out your hearts before me. This fort is our refuge! Our family!" Saviour shouts and looks up. ,, Certainly if anyone does not provide for those who are his own, and especially for those who are members of his family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than a person without faith."

The same woman who spoke before frowns even more. ,,Show us then! All the time you were speaking of the punishment from 'the one above'. And why are you the only one who doesn't die when-"

Chief pulls out the gun and aims it straight at her. She freezes and some people gasp as others shout in shock.
His breathing picks up and he starts yelling. ,,NO ONE SHOULD DARE TO OVERSTEP THEIR PLACE!"

Loud bang split the air.
My eyes go wide as I freeze, feeling my blood go cold and my hands tremble.
A very audible thud sounds behind me as Nelson falls to the ground, the gun no longer digging into my back.

,,Don't you dare William!" The familiar voice of Jason snaps me out of my shock, and I look in his direction.
He is standing on top of the wall with a firearm pointing directly at Chief.

Some of the guards pointed their firearms at him but most of the guards looked between each other. The people also stay silent, it almost feels like if the time stopped for a second.

I glance behind me only to see that the real fog is slowly creeping closer. If the gates aren't closed in time, those people can get infected.

,,How dare you lie to us! Kill our friends and family!" Jason's voice pierces the silence and Chief moves his aim from the woman to him. ,,Jason, I told you that if you try again, you will be next!"

His finger presses the trigger ever so slightly, but not enough to shoot. Without thinking I ram my shoulder against his back. With a grunt he falls from the stage and Saviour takes a step back with a gasp.

Another loud bang sounds and I feel the bullet fly past my neck. People start shouting and screaming as they either run for cover or attack the guards. I run off the stage and John runs up to me.

,,This is not according to plan!" He awkwardly laughs as he shakily unties me. He suddenly pulls me back as gunshots start echoing everywhere. I fall on my knees, and he looks around with horrified eyes.

Jason runs up to us a second later with a big grin on his face. ,,It worked!" He smiles even more as he pushes the firearm into Johns hands.

,,What the heck man! You were supposed to tell them the truth! Not kill a man!" John steps closer and rams a finger into Jason's chest. ,,Are you trying to kill us?!"

,,It worked, didn't it? Now c'mon we need to help the others!" John ran up to a shed and picked up an axe from the ground.

,,Nah man, I have to go and take Cody away!"

I grab his arm. ,,Don't touch the fog! Tell as many people as possible to get on rooftops, the higher the better! Or close the gates!"

Jason shakes his head as he extends his hand with a gun towards me. ,,No time. You need at least four people to close those gates. Here, take it. You know how to shoot right?"

I eye the shiny pistol in his hands and shake my head declining his offer. ,,No thanks I don't kill. "He shrugs and runs into the crowd of fighting people while yelling. ,,Then hide!"

Johns hands shake as he looks around for an opening. ,,I- I have to go check if- if he is-"

I grab his shoulders. ,,Hey! It's my job to panic. Your job is to go and protect your brother!"

His eyes focus and he nods. ,,You're coming with me?"

I shake my head. ,,I have to get my bag first." I won't forgive myself

if I lose Tios journal or compass.
Before he runs off, I grab his arm. ,,Thank you for everything. Especially the food."

He nods with a small grin and after he took a deep breath, he sprints as gunshots echoes in the growing darkness. I watch until I can't see him anymore, then I sprint towards the gate.
That guard left my bag in the forest, and I hope nobody took it while I was imprisoned.

As I near the gate, someone runs into me and both of us fall to the ground. The short dirty blonde hair belongs to Saviour, as he lifts his head and looks at me his green eyes filled with anger.
,,You." He rasps.

I scramble to my feet and turn towards the gate. Several people are pushing the big steel doors close, even some guards with rags are helping. The fog touched one of the doors as it got shut. They closed my escape route, just great.

The people who closed the door took a step back and I noticed how a tiny amount of teal glow made it through the crack between the doors.
It can get through their gate. I run to them and shout.

,,Get away from the gate!" I grab one of the helping people and push them back. ,,It's not sealed."
The small amount of the teal mist slowly squeezes inside and slowly expands.
,,Go! Get somewhere high up, tell as many as you can!"

The people run off and pass Saviour, he is glaring, and his chest moves with every breath he takes.
I glance at one of the watchtowers on the corner of the wall then look back at him.

He starts walking towards me and I instantly sprint towards the tower and the second I'm inside, I shut the door just as he slams his weight against it.

,,Open the door!" He yells as he kicks the door.
I scan the small room and grab a chair that I prop the door with. Then I run up the stairs to the nearest window and look out, I might be able to jump from this height, maybe without breaking anything.

A loud boom makes me jump in fright, it sounded as if something exploded in the fort. The gunshots continue and the door is still holding back Saviour who is mercilessly attacking it, trying to get inside.

Taking a deep breath, I prepare myself to jump. The door crack as a gunshot echoes in my ears, making me freeze momentarily. I look down and see how his hand reaches through a hole in the door as he fumbles with the chair propping the handle. He manages to push the chair out and opens the door.

I run to the top of the tower, hoping that I will find anything to protect myself with. I should have taken that gun Jason offered! As I run the last of the stairs I try to catch my breath, and here I thought I have a good stamina.

I look over the railing. The fog is everywhere, outside and inside the fort. One of the buildings is on fire and some people are still on the ground fighting with some guards. Many bodies lie on the ground as screams and cries fill the night.

,,Got you."

A cold shiver runs through my spine as I turn towards Saviour who blocks the staircase.
In his hand a handgun glistens in the light of the fire as he lifts it up.

,,If you just stayed quiet! This could've been avoided!" He growls and points the weapon at me.
,,But you just had to mess things up! Now he is going to kill me!"

He takes a step closer as his eyes reflect the burning flames below. His hand is shaking as his breathing turns shaky.

,,Chief? He is probably dead!" I try to reason with him as my back presses against the railing.

,,How would you know?!" His voice cracks a little as he takes another step forward. ,,Did you see him die?!"
I didn't. Nelson is dead, many people are dead. Chief is probably one of the biggest targets in this fort now. There is no way that somebody wouldn't try to kill him.

,,Looks like you won't find out." He mumbles and takes another small step forward.
He hesitates before turning around as thundering footsteps run up the staircase and a bulking man slams his shoulder into Saviour. I jump out the way as Saviour catches himself on the railing.

Jason grips the axe in his hands, his knuckles turning white with the force. He was breathing fast but maintained his defensive posture.
I quickly moved behind him.

,,Thanks." I squeak as I pass him, but he doesn't react. His focus is solely on Saviour.

,,Had ya fun, didn't ya?" Jason rasps. ,,Killing numerous people. My daughter included! Now." He runs at Saviour, lifting the axe. ,,You pay!"

Saviour eyes winded as he drops the gun and tries to getaway, only for the axe to catch his left eye and to fall over the railing. I close my eyes as he screams.

As I open my eyes again, Saviour is clinging with his left hand to the railing as he struggles to keep himself from falling, his left eye now has a gash that's bleeding. Jason stands over him and lifts the axe again.

Before I can stop Jason, he swings down, and Saviour's blood curdling scream pierces the night.

I look away as Jason turns towards me.

,,Its okay kiddo. He's not hurting anyone anymore." He takes a deep breath as he smiles slightly. ,,He's finally gone."

I swallow as I glance at the railing where Saviour was clinging to a second ago. I flinch as I notice his hand, cut off and supported by the axe still lodged into the wood.
I look away. ,,Thank you for coming to save me. I- I should go and get my bag."

Jason grumbles but nods.
,,You can stay you know? Things will change here, now that the lunatic is dead." He smiles. ,,You will be seen as a hero kid! People will love you."

I shake my head and clench my fists.
,,I can't. I gave a promise." Looking up at him, he lifts his eyebrows. ,,I can't break that promise."

,,If you say so." He shrugs. ,,Can't accompany you down, but the side gate was left open. When you exit the tower go right, behind the burning house."

I gratefully nod and run down the stairs. As soon as the fog touches my legs the feeling of thousand ice needles stabbing into my skin makes me flinch. I follow Jason's instructions until I find a small door wide open.

Even if the gates were sealed this door would have let the fog in. I run outside and sprint towards the direction of my bag. As I run deeper into the woods the darker it gets. I almost trip several times until I stumble to one of the machines, that is still working.

Not wanting to lose time I begin searching for my backpack in the almost pitch-black forest. As I walk, I trip over something soft and fall to the ground with a yelp.
My backpack, I found it!

Grabbing the bag, I scramble to my feet and run towards the secondary wall.
I will run. Run until I can't anymore.

Chapter 22

I have a headache.
Last night I was running till I literary collapsed and slept until it was almost midday. I'm lucky that nothing found me when I passed out. At the same time, I should start moving again, just maybe the pain will disappear with walking.

Pushing myself up, I feel my whole back crack. I look around, trying to figure out where I am and slowly stand up, stretching my arms. Having no idea where I ended up, I take the compass and head east as always.

As my legs carry me forward, I enjoy breakfast or rather lunch with dried meat I had in the bag and some water.
The weather is nice at least.

I stop and stay as quiet as possible, listening in on the forest sounds. I'm certain that I heard someone talking just now. Slowing my breathing to hear better I slowly look around for the source of the voice.

Laughter reaches my ears and I scramble towards the closest tree and climb up. With better view now, I search for movement and try to remain hidden.
The voices grow louder by the second until I see a light blue behind some trees.

,,I want to go back." A very quiet child voice reaches me as I see the kid on someone's shoulders. The kid is wearing the light blue as he hugs the face of the older person.

,,It'll be fine. Remember what I said earlier?" The familiar voice shocks me.
What is he doing here? Did he follow me?

I slowly get down on the ground and walk behind the two as they are too occupied in their conversation to notice me.
That isn't good. Out here it's better to always be on guard.

,,John?"

The older boy screams as he whips around, towards me. His eyes wide as his hands grab the large firearm strapped on his side.
I step back slightly surprised by his action.

His face lit up as he relaxes and comes closer. ,,You have no idea how glad I am that I found you." He laughs. ,,Oh, meet my little brother, Cody."

He looks up at the boy sitting on his shoulders. Cody has deep brown eyes and almost black hair. He is avoiding my gaze sheepishly and just barely whispers hello. I smile and wave at him but then focus on John.

,,How did you find me?" I ask and eye the firearm he carries.

,,Wasn't that hard to find you." He shrugs. ,,Jason told me in which direction you went, and we departed as soon as that... mist? Disappeared? Must say that it looks way more interesting than that 'fake' one." He laughs and sets Cody on the ground.

I nod and look around before motioning to them to start walking. ,,It's not the best idea to chat in one place when we are so close to a fort. Animals like to gather around them."

John nods and grabs Cody's hand.
The younger boy looks at the ground the entire time. Maybe he is timid or nervous after leaving the safety of the wall.

,,Why did you follow me?" I ask John.
He bites his cheek and looks down at Cody, before looking at me.

,,When you told the people not to touch the teal fog. What happens when they do touch it?" He looks ahead with worry filling his eyes.

,,I saw so many people running through it. Some were so caught up in their fighting that they just didn't hear others warning them."

,,I'm not really sure." I admit. ,,I know that they will look somewhat like me. The clouded eyes and white hair, but what else it does? I don't know. I ran into several 'infected' people and most of them were, well normal. There was this one woman though. Sh- She tried to-"

I shake my head.
Whats wrong with me? Why can't I just say it?

John looks intensely at me, and I just shook my head.
,,The radio broadcast at the beginning of all of this said that it is harmful or deadly. I don't really remember anymore, but they didn't say a word about people going insane."

He nods and I catch a glimpse of Cody. He is peaking at me from time-to-time while holding his brother's hand tightly.
When he sees me watching me, he looks away and pulls on his brother's hand. John bends down and Cody whispers into his ear, until he starts snickering and shaking his head. He whispers something back to his brother and both of them look at me.

,,What?" I ask as John gets up and picks up his brother for another shoulder ride.

,,Nothing." He replies and then chuckles a little. ,,You know, when we separated in the fog, I thought you will stay till morning. But when I met up with Jason, he said that you bolted right away."

I shrug and scratch my neck.
,,Well, I was in shock and just wanted to get away from all the guns and chaos."

He nods and looks up at Cody.
,,Want something to drink?"

Cody nods with a quiet yes and John takes a bottle, handing it to his brother. Cody sips a little and gives the bottle back. John takes a

sip himself before extending the bottle to me. I declined since I have my own.

Now that I travel with them, it will be smarter to set up camp sooner and hunting before that would be ideal.
,,John? How good are you with that... gun?"

He blinks and looks down on the firearm.
,,This rifle? Haven't used it yet but I should be able to shoot."

I nod and look around, usually animals run towards people first, but I guess having a bird for dinner is fine too.
,,If you see any small animal use a knife, but if something bigger attacks us it might be easier to use the gun."
Glancing at him I notice how his brows rise in confusion.
,, Why would anything attack us?"

I mentally facepalm. Right, he was behind a wall from the beginning. Of course, they don't understand.

As we continue walking, I try to explain the situation as well as asking Cody a few questions or asking if he wanted to know something, but the younger boy just shook his head every time. The feeling that he didn't like me grew with every failed attempt.

As the sun slowly descended, I started looking for a good campsite. It will be theirs first time sleeping outside, and I have only one hammock.
,,Do you think you will be able to sleep on a tree? Without falling down?"

John looks at the trees and shrugs with a smile. ,,One way to find out, but do you have rope or something for Cody?"

,,I have for you. Cody can use my hammock."

Codys face lit up as he looks at the tall trees and back at me.
,,Can I?"

I nod with a smile and point at a random group of trees.

,,Let's make camp and something to eat before night comes."

I climb up and tie the hammock for Cody as he and John gather sticks for fire. BY the time I get back down they managed to start the fire, surprising me. They worked fast.
Since we didn't find anything to hunt, I give them my smoked meat.

Cody isn't a big fan. No surprise there, I never was good at cooking. John eats without a complaint, and I also enjoy a few pieces.
Later John helps Cody climb the tree and I climb after them.

,,John." I get his attention and hand him the rope.
He takes it with a smile and ties himself to the branch, and since we are so high up the branches bend slightly under our weight. Falling from this height wouldn't kill us but will be rather painful.

I watch as the sky gets darker and stars start appearing, the wind swaying the trees slightly as the teal fog shimmers below us.
,,Are you asleep?" John asks as he turns on his branch.

,,Not yet."

He takes a deep breath. ,,Cody touched the fog."

I sit up almost losing my balance. ,,What? Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

He sighs.
,,When I went to check up on him, I found him in the daycare. So, I took him and went on the roof and once all the fighting has stopped and people started to calm down, I fell asleep. I woke up in the morning and Cody was nowhere in sight. I found him later playing with the fog in a corner."

I look down. It had to be a scary experience for John, not knowing what would happen to his younger brother.

He continues.
,,I was looking for you because I thought you know more about this stuff."

,,I don't know much. As I said before I just met a couple of other infected people. Since he got infected only a few hours ago he won't experience any symptoms for maybe another three days?"

,,There are symptoms?" He groans and rubs his face.

I nod even though he doesn't see the action. ,,Headaches, problems with eyes and the worst of them all is the chemical aftertaste."

He groans again and I shake my head.
Theres no need to stress him.

,,Its okay. We can find someone who understands this better and even if we don't find anyone, he still has you and me to help him get through it. Unless you want to get back to your fort?"

,,Thanks, and no, I don't think I want to go back. Things will change now but, the memories wont."

I nod in understanding and relax on the branch, but something keeps bugging me.
,,Your brother doesn't like me, does he?"

John snickers.
,,He's just a little nervous with new people. Also, he might be a little scared of your eyes. He is just 9 to start with. He said that you look like a ghoul."

,,Seriously?" I deadpan. ,,A ghoul? Don't they look like demons or something?"

John laughs quietly.

Chapter 23

Waking up before sunrise in pain wasn't my plan at all, but I can't be surprised after sleeping tied on a branch.
The two are still sleeping soundly and the fog is slowly evaporating in the sunlight.

Taking a deep breath of the morning air I tried to listen in on the birds, but the few feathery animals that are around were too far away to hear them clearly. Deciding that breakfast would be nice, I climb down.

When the remaining fog touches my feet, I feel the intolerable, yet now familiar, stinging. I wonder why it feels like that, it's almost like an irritant.
Looking around to make sure nothing is around to disturb the sleeping boys I head out to find something edible.

I have the dried mushroom slices, but I doubt that boiling them would fill all three of us, and we already ate the remaining smoked meat I had. Maybe for the better, as it could start spoiling at any time.
Some fruit would be fine, but I doubt that I will find any around here, maybe if we find a farm in the future. For now, hunting is the best way to not starve, but surprisingly since I escaped there were no animals. It left me wondering if Chief ordered to hunt those down.

There isn't even a squirrel in sight let alone something to feed 3 people. If it was only me, I would just go on the empty stomach and eat after I found something.
Sligtly irritated that I haven't found anything, I head back towards the camp, by the time I make it back the sleeping princesses could wake up.

I near the spot where we're camping and spot John as he struggles to help Cody down from the tree. His bag is already down, along

the rope I gave him, but the hammock is still hanging.

,,Need help?" I ask as I make my way towards them.

John jumps a little and turns his head slightly to look at me.
,,Can you stop appearing out of nowhere? I swear you will give me a heart attack one day."

I grinned at him and looked up at Cody, who is clutching a branch in his arms as he held it for dear life.

,,Its okay Cody. You can do it." I try to be a little supportive for the small kid. I never was good with kids or babies.

John shakes his head and climbs all the way to his brother.
,,Heard that? You can do it! One leg after the other and you will be down in no time."

Cody shakes his head and climbs back up to the hammock. John looks at me with a sorry expression.
,,This may take a while. Sorry for slowing you down."

Shrugging my shoulders, I start climbing up to them.
,,Its okay, I don't have an appointment or anything." Passing by John, I lift myself on the closest branch to Cody. ,,What's the matter?"

He looks at me and then looks away right after.
,,I'm scared."

,,Of heights?" I ask and he nods.

,,Climbing up was easy. Getting down went smoothly until he looked down." John informs me and pulls himself on the branch below me.

,,What if John carries you down?" I suggest and John looks at me with a confused frown. ,,On his back." I add.

Cody looks at me and hugs himself. ,,What if he drops me?"

I smiled at the boy. ,,Then I will catch you."
John glares at me. ,,Hey! I won't drop you Cody!"

,,What if you don't catch me?" He sniffles as his eyes water.

,,I will catch you. But since you trust your brother more how about this." Shrugging my bag off my back I toss it to John as he barely catches it. ,,I will carry you down and John will catch you if something happens."

Giving him time to decide I look down at John who waits for his answer.
Cody finally gives a small nod, so I signal John to climb down, and he does so.

,,Okay, I will turn, and you have to jump on my back and hold as tightly as you can, okay,"

He nods again so I waste no time and turn around waiting for him to hop on. As he climbs on his arms wrap around my neck tightly.
I laugh a little. ,,Just try not to choke me, okay."
He held tightly as I slowly made my way down, and when I prepared to jump down from the tree, John grabbed his brother and sat him on his shoulders.

,,You see? You did it!" He cheered and jumped in place until Cody started laughing.
I smiled and climbed one last time for the hammock.
,,Oh, and we might go hungry for some time, at least until we catch something to eat."

Cody looks up at me and asks so quietly that I almost didn't hear him. ,,Is that why you disappeared in the morning?"

,,Yeah, I went looking for food, but didn't have much luck." Untying one side of the hammock I reached for the second end. ,,Did I scare you by disappearing?" I joke and struggle with the knot.

,,John was scared."

,,No, I wasn't!" He tries to defend himself.

,,But you said that you are scared she left?" Cody looks at his brother.

I just laugh and let the finally free hammock fall to the ground.
,,Don't worry, I don't leave without saying goodbye first." I jump down and collect the hammock. ,,By the way, do you know where are we? I kind of don't have a map."

He looks into the distance as I gather everything and take out my compass.
,,Somewhere in Minnesota, but I don't know where exactly. Maybe if we get to a town or a city I can be of more help."

Minnesota? I got so far by already? I feel kind of proud of myself.
,,Okay." I agree and start walking east as always. ,,Keep your eyes and ears open. I couldn't find anything this morning, but you never know."

,,Hey." John taps my shoulder. ,,I forgot to ask you before, but what's the plan?"

I stop in the middle of the dirt road and watch as Cody plucks some kind of weed from the ground.
,,To be truthful, I'm just planning to go to Crystal Falls and find the fort where my friend is. After that, well, I haven't thought that far."

Cody comes running to John and gives him the weed, which appears to be chickweed.
His face brightness when John takes the plant with a smile and puts it with the rest of weeds, he collected, then runs off to gather more.

,,Do you think they will accept us? I mean Cody looks fine and all but when, I mean after he-" He pauses and grips the clutch of plants in his hand. ,,What if they refuse you and him entry just because of... I mean what should I even call it? Infection? Transform? No,

that sounds just bad!"

He groans and pulls at his hair. Trying to comfort him with a pat on his shoulder I try to reassure him.
,,If it comes to that, we can always stay on the move until we find a fort that will accept you and if that doesn't work you can always go back to your original fort."

,,Yeah." He sighs as he goes forward, so I follow. ,,What are the odds that every fort will turn us do- Wait... What do you mean by 'you'? You don't want to be accepted into a fort?"

I shrug as I watch Cody run in front of us from left side of the road to the right side.
,,I haven't thought about it, but not likely." I think out loud but then add sarcastically. ,,I mean last time I got close to a fort I almost got killed by crazy cult people and became a part of a rebellion."

John snorts with a grin. ,,Don't forget that you helped overthrow a maniac."

Cody runs up to us again and hands John another plant. I wasn't sure what it was, but it had pretty, violet flowers. As he went to search for another plant John keeps his gaze on him.
,,How long do you think he has? Until the symptoms?"

I try to remember how long it took for my symptoms to appear.
,,Mine showed up after three or four days. But it may vary from a person to person, I'm not sure."

He takes a deep breath and nods.
Looking in front of me I watch as the small kid kicks a rock and runs after it. He was energetic and curios but pretty shy. I can't imagine him acting like that crazy woman.

,,Let's make camp and I will go look for something to eat. It may be a good idea to get as much food as we can, so if we stumble across a town or a village, we should scavenge for anything."

John nods and Cody runs up to us again, this time he comes to me

and puts his fist towards me, holding something.
I reach out and let him drop a small gray rock that glitters slightly in the light.

,,For me?" I ask with a smile, and he nods before running off again.
I happily observe the shiny present.
When I look up, John is giving me a smirk.

,,What?" I ask.

,,Nothing." He grins. ,,But someone might like to you."

I snort and pocket the gift. ,,You're just jealous that I got a gift."

He shows me his bouquet of weeds and plants. ,,I don't know how about you, but I got flowers from my brother. So, you are the jealous one."

With a laugh I point towards the forest.
,,Fine, you won. Now let's make a camp. Do you think we should go hunting together? You have the gun so if something bigger shows up-"

,,You and Cody can stay and make camp. As a man, it is my duty to provide food."

He looks at me after I stay quiet as if checking if he said something stupid.
,,I would rather if your duty was not to get killed." Taking out my steak knife I hand it to him. ,,But if you are sure that you can handle rabid animals that attack you without thinking then sure go on."

His eyes go wide as he glances at the forest in front of us.
,,On the other hand, we are stronger in groups, right?" He smiles awkwardly and I smile in victory.

,,If you had any experience with them, I wouldn't pressure so much on staying together, but believe me. When they bite, it hurts."

He nods and calls Cody back to us.
,,Okay, then teach us."

I look at him with wide eyes but then smile mischievously.
,,Bad choice."

Chapter 24

The sound of shattered glass echoed through the empty streets as John broke another window.
Now that I wasn't alone it was much harder to get supplies.
Cody and John needed better bags since theirs are too small. They also needed more bottles for water and knives as well as hammocks and a change of clothes.

I climb through the broken window and search the house as he went with Cody to another building.
Searching for anything useful I come across some boxes of tea and some grounded coffee.
John joked that I was a chicken, since I don't want to get near a fort, but after I explained that they might not want to even talk to infected people, he suggested that he will trade.

I go from room to room and grab anything that was left behind. From cables to anything edible.
This house didn't have much in the first place, unless I count in the amounts of pots and wilted plants.

With a sigh I exit the house and wave to John and Cody as they wait for me.

,,Anything of use?" John asks as he gives Cody a bottle of water.

,,Unless you want to start gardening." I shrug and look around the street. ,,Nothing. There has to be a fort nearby or the people who lived here took everything with them."

Cody takes a sip and makes a face and examines the bottle in his hands.
,,It's bad." He glares at the transparent liquid.

,,Water?" John grabs the bottle and is about to take a sip when I grab his arm.

,,Wait. We don't know if it's contagious." I take my second bottle and hand it to Cody. ,,Here, I haven't drank from this one yet."

Cody takes it and gives it a sniff before taking a small sip. He spit it right out.
,,It's bad."

John gave a worried look and I nodded.
,,It's okay Cody. The water isn't bad, it will just taste funny for some time."

Cody glances at his brother and grabs his hand.
,,For how long?"

John's eyes meet mine and I show him two and then three fingers.
,,Probably two to three d-"

quickly mouthing 'weeks' to him he notices and stops and corrects himself.
,,Two or three weeks."

Cody looks down and then turns to me. ,,Can I drink something else?"

I doubt that drinking something else will change the chemical aftertaste, and the worst part is that it will only get stronger until subtly disappearing after three weeks.
,,I don't know if it will change anything, but if we find something else, we can try."

John bit the inside of his cheek and claps his hands together.
,,Okay, enough of the sad faces! Let's go and find that fort, trade and then figure out what we can do next."

Surprised at his sudden change in character I nod and pack the bottle before looking around the abandoned town.
,,If we find the post office lets search it for the map."

,,Or trade for it." John smiled before taking the lead, leaving me and Cody staring at his back.
He turns around and gives us a small smile. ,,You two coming or do

I have to leave you behind?"

I watch the people from the fort with narrow eyes as they tend to their animals outside the fence. Some are entering and some are exiting the big gate. Luckily, we are hidden by the dense shrubs on the hill, and the new clothes I found for the two brothers gave them better camouflage. Unfortunately, I couldn't find better pants for Cody, so he still has his blue jeans.

,,I still think this is a bad idea." I mutter my thought out loud.

John sighs and grabs the bag full of items he could trade. Mostly tomato seeds as I found quite the stash in one home and some cables as well as some batteries.
,,Like I told you before, if something happens or if I won't be back before fog rolls in then take Cody and leave." He glances at his brother and smiles slightly. ,,Cody, listen to her, okay? She will take care of you."

Cody grips his brother's sleeve and shakes his head. ,,I'll go with you."

John smiles and pats his head.
,,Not today. Stay here and take care of Sio."

Cody pouts and John removes his sleeve from the tight grip of his brother's hands. He hands me the rifle which I reluctantly take. We agreed that it was safer if he went without a firearm as the fort might want to take it by force. He got up and starts walking towards the fort as we watch from the shrubs.

,,We will be waiting in the camp." I say and see him nod his head.

We watch as he slowly approaches the fort and the people notice him, they wave towards the fort and some people head in his direction. It seems like they are talking until two heavily armored people from the fort reach them.

I hold my breath as they lead him towards the fort, but my attention is redirected behind us as even Cody tenses at the rustling. He hugs my arm and hides behind me. I almost forgot that forts have an unpleasant number of dangerous animals roaming around.

The white coat glistens in the sunlight as the hare jumps out from the shadows and charges straight at us. The tension disappears from my muscles at the small critter.

Here I thought that we will go hungry.

As the hare gets close enough to start whacking my leg and biting at my pants, I grab it and hold it on the ground.
Cody watches from behind me and I realize that this is his first time seeing an infected animal.

,,This is what happens when something gets sick. Their blood and eyes turn milky white and in some cases be aggressive, like this hare." I explain as the hare struggles in my grasp.

I turn towards him, and he is staring at my hair. When he notices me, he quickly looks back at the critter and asks.

,,Will I have white hair too?"

Im taken aback with this question. John didn't say if Cody knows that he is infected. But we did talk about this infection being contagious, so maybe he is smart enough to put two and two together.

,,Most likely." I nod and stand up looking back at the fort. John must be already inside, and it made me only more nervous now that I couldn't see him. The hare in my grasp reminded me of its existence as it fought against my grip. ,,Let's go make a camp nearby."

Cody nods slowly and grabs my hand, surprising me as he watched the critter struggle.
,,Is it really dangerous?"

I glance at the fighting animal. ,,Not really. It will just attack you, but bigger animals may be dangerous."

,,The birds John found yesterday tried to run away. Were those okay?"

He is smart. He notices the differences and connects the dots faster than I thought he would or maybe I just don't understand children at all. Not spending a lot of time with them might be the reason why I thought that Cody wouldn't understand a lot of things.

,,They were okay because birds and fish don't get sick." I lead him deeper in the forest and try to keep the hare from biting me. I didn't want to kill it in front of Cody, but that fur ball was starting to get on my nerves.

,,You are also sick." He commented and went to grab a pinecone.
,,But you're not angry."

I smile and nod my head before remembering something.
,,I forgot the rifle." Facepalming myself I turn around and go back for the firearm.

And John wants me to take care of his little brother? One day I will forget to breathe.

Cody hungrily chews the meat. It is his first warm meal in a while and even if it must taste horrible, he doesn't care.
I managed to butcher the hare and catch one more squirrel. The meat that wasn't cooked is currently smoked for later.

We made camp here before so John knows where to look for us and if he won't show up before the sun gets low, I will go for him.
The though of what Cody might do when John doesn't come back plagues my mind for some time now.

There was an hour or two before the sunset and I was getting more and more impatient with every minute. Cody stayed quiet most of

the time, occasionally asking some random questions.
He would also look around for rocks or other things he found interest in, like a grasshopper he managed to catch.

,,What is your job?" He asked as he put away an only half eaten piece of meat.

,,I didn't have a stable job." I grimaced at the memories. ,,I had many jobs you could say."

,,Like?"

,,Well?" I scratch my neck as I try to choose between various jobs. ,,I used to work at a bar, or in fast food. I worked in a gas station as a cashier once and as a dog walker."

,,Why so many?" He asks as he picks up one of his rocks he collected earlier.

,,I travelled a lot." Chuckling to myself I remember how some of those jobs drained me mentally. ,,I wanted to see the world, but to do that I had to have money."

It was true that I visited many places, but I never left the continent. I also never found a place where I was willing to stay forever but perhaps this is my lifestyle, always on the move.

,,What about you?" I ask. ,,What do you want to do when you grow up?"

This seems to catch him off guard as his wide eyes meet mine. He stays quiet for a moment before clutching the rock in his hands.

,,Astronaut." He mumbles. ,,I want to go to space and bring a rock from the moon."

I smile at the kid and look up, but unfortunately there are clouds today.
,,You know what? When the sky is clear I will show you

something."

He nods his head and looks back at the piece of meat with distaste in his eyes.
,,I know it tastes bad." I sigh. ,,But you should eat more."

He nods and takes a small bite before swallowing it instantly. I didn't know if it was safe or healthy to do so but if it meant that he would eat more-

Cody suddenly jumps up and with a happy smile, shouting as he runs towards the trees.
,,Brother!"

My head whips towards the trees as John waves at us with a smile.
With a smile of my own I get up and walk towards him.
As Cody runs up to him, John lifts him up.

,,See, buddy? I told you that I will come back!" He spins Cody around and puts him on his shoulders.

,,Good to see you back, we saved you some meat." I cross my hands and watch the two brothers.

,,Oh, thanks! I'm starving." With a jump to his steps, he walks with me towards the fire where I give him some roasted meat.
He shrugs his bag off and takes the meat before shoving it in his mouth.

,,The people were nice. Wanted me to get you so you could sleep inside, but I told them that if we won't show up before the night falls-" He trails off as he shrugs. ,,Anyway, how about you? Anything interesting happen?"

,,Not really."

,,She forgot your rifle." Cody smiles at me mischievously.
My jaw drops as that little kid rats me out and John snorts with a teasing glint in his eye.

,,Anyway." John snickers. ,,They were very interested in the electrical stuff, as well as the batteries. The seeds were traded for some flour. Oh! And I got a map! It's from an atlas but it's better than nothing. We also got some energy bars."

I watch as John proudly and happily says what he got. Just from trading we had more supplies than what we got during our looting in the town. If not for him I would avoid this fort like any other and look for the way myself.

,,Thanks John."

Chapter 25

The sunlight shines through the leaves and lights the dim forest, revealing the hog that was eating roots sticking out of the ground. The poor creature has no idea that it is being hunted.

John and I hid in the bushes not so far away and waited for the good opportunity to strike. Or rather John waited as he had the rifle, I just tagged along.
He waits for the animal to turn around so he can have a clear shot and not risk the hog running away.

I spotted the hog this morning as it was scavenging around our camp and when it left, John decided to hunt it. Cody didn't feel that good, so he wanted to sleep a little longer, and who are we to say no to him.

,,Finally." John mutters as the hog turns right, giving him the clear shot.
Not wanting to be completely deaf, I scoot away from John and cover my ears.

The echoing bang makes me jump and my breathing hitches. Even when I covered my ears the bang was extremely loud.
John had some ear protection, in a form of leaves, so when the squealing animal stops moving, he takes the leaves out of his ears.

,,That went better than I thought." He gets up from the ground and dusts his pants.

I get up as well and walk towards the hog. ,,You're a good shot." The bullet pierced the animal right behind the shoulder, hitting the heart and instantly killing it.

,,Of course, I am." He puffs his chest out with pride and strides towards me. As he glances at the hog, he stays quiet before looking at me. ,,Why? What did I hit?"

The complete disbelief washes over me. It's not his first time, is it? How is he so good at it at his first time?

,,The heart?" I point the entry hole. ,,Please tell me you went hunting before."

To my bigger surprise he shakes his head and purses his lips.

,,My grandpa was a hunter and he used to tell the story how he shot the biggest buck he ever saw. He said that he aimed right behind the shoulder, so that is what I did. Didn't know that it would work." He scratches his head.
,,Anyway, what now?"

With one look at the big pig, I knew that it would be a waste of strength and daylight to drag it back to camp, even though we are close to it.
,,I will start butchering, you can go back and check on Cody. Start a fire as well, maybe boil some water and we can have a simple stew."

He nods and goes back towards the camp, while I try to get the meat out with my trusty knife. It could use some sharpening but is definitely better than the dull pocketknife.
While I trim the meat I try to plan for the next day.

Cody isn't doing that good, since his infection is progressing, and it would be better to let him rest. Walking with tremors and barely seeing anything isn't a great experience.
This meat should last us for some time if we smoke or cure it, now that we have some salt that John got from the fort.

Finding a better place for camp would be ideal as Cody doesn't like climbing trees and even John is afraid that he will fall. There is a city nearby, but it may not be safe there. I should probably go scout and scavenge it later.

I cut off another large piece of meat and leave it inside the carcass, as I shrug my backpack off and look for that one plastic bag I had somewhere.
Once I find it, it will be just a matter of time when I pack the meat

and go back.

The bag rustles as I finally take it out and stuff it with meat, by the time I put the last piece of meat inside it was full.
There still is quite a bit of meat on the carcass, but it would take too much time to get it all.
With the full bag I head back towards the campsite, and as I get closer, the smell of smoke gets stronger.

John adds a few sticks to the small fire, Cody sits near him with closed eyes as he rests against a tree. He didn't look great. Pale and sweaty. His hair was a lot lighter as well, maybe another week and it will be completely white. ,,I'm back." I set the bag of meat down and take my backpack off, before sitting down and looking at my hands covered in the blood of the hog. ,,Can you help me clean my hands?" I ask John and he nods.

He takes my bottle and pours some water on my hands as I rub them together to get all the blood off. With a small thanks I shake my hands to dry them faster and look at Cody who was trying to rub the tears from his eyes.

Poor kid. He stopped running around as his energy dropped and he isn't eating as much as he should. I guess that walking will be hard for him as well and John can't carry him every day, even if we take turns carrying him, it will just be easier to find a good place to settle down for some time.

,,I'll go to the city that's nearby and look for a good place to stay for some days." I say as I get up and stretch.
Cody looks, or rather tries to look at me. ,,When are you coming back?" He rasps and I pass him a bottle of water.

,,As fast as I can, okay? Now, drink some water. I know it tastes disgusting, but you have to drink."

John frowns. ,,Alone? Without even eating?"

I nod. ,,It will be faster that way and I just want to look for a better place to camp than trees. A tall building, you know? Cody won't

have to climb, and we will be able to stay there longer."

John agrees after a bit of bickering, so I head out towards the town. The walk there was uneventful, and I was at the border in less than two hours.
I look around the small houses, trying to find the best place where Cody would feel safe when me or John go for supplies.

After a long walk I discovered a taller, bigger building. At first glance it looks like a warehouse, but when I rounded the corner and spotted the entrance, the big letters above the doors revealed the high school.

,,Hermantown." I read out loud and look around before checking if the doors were opened. No such luck.
The doors are made of glass so breaking in will be easy, but getting on the roof might be easier if we climb the air filters on the back of the building. It's not like Cody will want to go anywhere until he feels better.

With a grin on my face, I head back, searching several buildings on the way, but many of them were thoughtfully searched by someone else. Not many items left, just some clothes.

Entering another house, I search the rooms for anything usable, but yet again find only dust and items with no use. With a sigh I open another door that leads to the garage, The fog stirs with the slight movement of the door.

Not even a car parked inside, not like I could drive anyway. The tools on one desk in the corner seem useless to me as well. Scratching my neck, I turn to leave only to catch something interesting in the corner of my eye.

Now this can be useful. The slightly peeling green paint on the bike was a little too bright for my liking, but the other dark blue had my appeal. John would appreciate one as well and I can find one for Cody.
Bikes can make this trip so much faster and if I find one of those trailers for bikes, then Cody won't even need a bike.

I purse my lips and debate if I have time to go back and lead the boys here or if I should find the trailer now and go back on the bike. The question is if anyone in this town even has one of those. I check the wheels and they definitely need some adjusting to do. The blue one creaked slightly when I turned the handlebars, but I doubt that it will fall apart.

Taking a deep breath, I lead the blue bike out of the building and go back for the green one. I might as well leave them closer to the high school building. John might know how to fix them and then we can plan from there.

I lead both bikes at once, kicking myself over them several times and after some time I arrive under the building, leaving the bikes behind the trash containers.

Without missing a heartbeat, I head back towards the boys. The news might lift their spirits a little, besides Cody has several more days of uncomfort ahead of him so the idea of a bike ride might make him happier. At the same time, I don't know if he even likes bikes.

John seems to like everything. He even praised my cooking, when I know that it was horrible. His face was telling the truth as he tried to chew it. Dandelions as a salad and oversalted meat made even me choke slightly. Cody didn't even try the dandelions and only ate some of the meat.

The smell of smoke directed me back towards the camp where John is smoking the meat and Cody sips slowly at the water. When he saw me, his face lit up with a smile.

,,I'm back." I say as I get closer and sit down next to Cody, He drank half of the bottle, good.

,,Welcome back." John passes me a piece of meat on a stick. ,,You were quick," He says with a frown. ,,The sun will set in maybe an hour."

,,Its four hours of walking there and back." I bite into my first meal of today. ,,Besides, I found the best place to camp for several days and our new means of transport."

Both of them give me confused looks so I explain.

,,High school building. Tall and big, so there's even space to run on the roof. And I found bikes. Two for now and they have some wear and tear but should be usable. Tomorrow we can head there."

John nods and pokes the hot embers with a stick. ,,Any animals?"

I furrow my brows. Now that I think about it, there were no animals. Not even rats. Maybe they relocated closer to the humans.

,,I haven't seen any."

He nods and takes out the map he got from the fort. The torn page from the atlas didn't show many towns or cities but shows enough to pinpoint our location to some degree.

,,I planned the route when you were gone." He points to a red dot on the map. ,,This is the fort I traded with and one of the workers there told me that Crystal Falls are around here." He points at a part of Michigan between Lake Superior and Lake Michigan.

,,And were around here." I point at the west side of Lake Superior.

,,Yes, so if we follow the coast up till the Ontonagon village and then-" He moves his finger across as he speaks. ,,Follow this highway till Baraga and then down east, we should reach Crystal Falls."

We are closer than I thought we were. ,,Looks good. With bikes we can reach it in... a week?"

John snorts and shakes his head. ,,You don't ride bikes much do you? Three days, maybe two and we will be there."

I smile at his jab and shake my head. ,,Unless we find a trailer for

the bikes then we will wait for Cody to get better."

John nods and looks at Cody. ,,Are you up for a walk tomorrow?"
Cody just looks at us and nods his head slowly.
I could see that he didn't feel like walking any time soon.
,,How about giving your brother puppy eyes so he can carry you?"

John glares at me slightly. ,,He has legs you know?"

,,You have as well. I can carry your bag and you can carry him on your shoulders."

John looks at Cody who is looking at him with the biggest puppy eyes he could muster. The tears swelling in them made him even more cute.

,,Fine." John groaned in defeat.

Chapter 26

,,How far is the city?" John asks as we walk on the asphalt road.

It shouldn't be that far, I think. When I went alone it took me only about two hours to reach the city and considering that we are walking for about three hours now.... I'm pretty sure we're close.

,,Not far." I turned around to look at him and his brother.
Cody is resting as John carries him on his shoulders. They look cute and remind me of when I was little.
Dad used to carry me like that as well, usually when we were on our way to the local bakery for some snacks after he came back from work.

,,Soo." John trails off for a second. ,,That school you mentioned. Do you really think it's safe?"

,,Unless infected animals mutate and grow wings." I joke and notice the first few buildings in the distance. ,,See? I told you it isn't far."

Cody lifts his head and blinks several times before grimacing. ,,I don't see it."

,,You will in a while." I smile. ,,It's a pretty big city and we will stay there until you feel better."

John pats his leg. ,,See? Sio found us a secret place to rest. She even said that you will be able to run on the roof!"

I scoff at the nickname and start leading them again. Hopefully I remember the way there. It gets me thinking though. Since we will need to stay there for a few days, we should make a little improvised roof on the actual roof, in case it rains. Also going hunting and stocking up on food might be a good idea.

As we walked into the city, I easily found the school and showed

John the bikes. Unfortunately, some parts are broken beyond repair. What was wrong with them? I have no idea, he started to talk in riddles at that point. I only know how to put the chain back on. So, I will either find new bikes or find the parts he pinpointed.

I show him my idea of getting on the roof and John is not too sure about my vision.

,,I don't think this is the best way to get up there." He stares at the air filters. ,,There must be a way inside the school, right? A staircase or something?"

,,Unless you want to risk getting infected." I shrug. ,,I didn't go inside so I don't know. I will go first and throw you a rope if you want."

,,As if I could climb a rope." He sighs. ,,Okay, but if I fall, it's your fault."

Rolling my eyes I start to climb the filters, which is easier than I thought. Once I reach the ledge, I pull myself up and look down at the boys.
,,Its easier than it looks!"

,,Sure!" John sarcastically shrugs his shoulders, causing Cody to look up with squinted eyes.
,,Do I need to climb that?" He asks and John instantly shakes his head.

,,No, no. You just have to hold on tightly." He takes a deep breath and starts climbing as Cody wraps his arms around his head.
,,Bro, I said hold tightly. Not choke me." He chuckles as he slowly gets to the top.

Once he pulls himself up, he looks down and purses his lips.
,,Okay, you were right. Wasn't that hard."

,,Told you." I grin and take a good look behind me. ,,Don't celebrate yet. One more climb ahead of us."

,,What!?" He turns around and spots the second wall. ,,How did I not notice it before?"

I shrug and look around for the easiest way up. The vent sticking out of the wall is the best option. Pulling myself up the vent I manage to look at the actual roof. A lot of vents but otherwise empty.

,,Okay." Jumping down I throw one bag on the roof and start climbing down for the second one. ,,Go up and get Cody settled. I'm going for some supplies."

,,Are you su-"

,,Yes!" I cut him off and go to the closest building in search of one thing.
A mattress.
I don't care how I want to get it up there, but I'm done sleeping with either my back shaped like a croissant or on the hard floor.

,,That should be enough." John put the final batch of sticks next to the fire and added some in.
I didn't answer as I was still slightly angry at him. He didn't allow me to drag the mattress up here, so it was currently laying on the floor. He was worried that I wouldn't be able to get it up here, and even if he was right, I was just slightly angry.
Atleast we have a makeshift roof if it starts raining.

He carried a few rocks and bigger branches, that he later used to support a tarp. I have a feeling that it may collapse when a stronger wind comes, but for now it is holding up.

Cody sat next to me and sorted his rocks, pinecones and other things he found on the way. Some leaves unfortunately turned brown and crumbled slightly, but that's to be expected.

The pinecones are sorted by their size, from smallest to biggest. The rocks vary in size and colors, some sparkle and some are from the

river.
I used to collect stuff as well,

,,Sio?" Cody whispers and hands me a few of the pinecones. ,,Can you plant these?"

I doubt a tree will grow if I just dig a hole and bury a pinecone.
,,Sure."
But he doesn't need to know that. ,,Why do you want to plant them?"

He looks at me and then at the pinecones. ,,Just because."

Smiling I stuff the pinecones in my pocket. John smiles as well, probably also aware that the trees might not grow.

We stay in comfortable silence until I remember something I wanted to ask for some time now.
,,Why did you choose Sio as my nickname?"

,,Hmm?" John looks up. ,,Aren't you angry at me?" He jokingly lifts his eyebrows.

Scoffing I lean back. ,,What? You thought I would be angry for an eternity?"

He shrugs and pokes the hot embers with a stick. ,,It's the easiest way to call you. I could call you Xio, but Sio just sounds better."

Our first night in the city went without a problem. My back is killing me, and Cody is still struggling but otherwise there are no problems. The only thing that we decided to focus on was food and supplies for trade.

When John was in the fort, the people told him that electronic stuff and batteries are in high demand. Not many forts are interested in food as they have their own steady supply, but gardening

equipment is welcomed.

John decided this morning that he would go hunting and later when he gets back, I will go and loot some houses. Cody would be fine if we left him alone for some time, but I doubt he would appreciate being alone when he couldn't function as lively as he usually did.

Since John still hasn't come back, and Cody is sleeping I occupied myself with organizing my backpack. One thing is for sure, it is a mess.

,,Fishing line and some tape." I mumble as I take them out of my bag. ,,The journal and my broken phone, as well as that stupid note."
I have no idea why I'm dragging it with me. Maybe in case I stumble across Cooper, then I can shove it in his face.

The change of clothes I have is dirty, so finding new clothes for us is on top of my priorities. More kitchen supplies, like knives or salt. Cody might appreciate some table games or books.

I emptied my backpack and packed only the necessities. The journal and note as well as my phone, the tape and fishing line and one coil of shoelace, compass and the knife. Leaving the rest to create more space for things I might find today.

Just as I finished packing, John's head popped over the ledge. He is covered in white blood as he drags the dead, gutted deer on his shoulders. His gun strapped to his back with some rope.

,,Heavy?" I ask as he lets the carcass fall with a thump.

Sweatly and panting he sits down next to the dead animal. ,,A little. Hardest part was climbing here." He grins.

With a smile I get up and stretch, ready to finally head to the city. I'm done sitting here and doing nothing.

,,Wait!" John sits up with a grin. ,,I met someone today."

Met? As in humans?
,,What?" I ask, furrowing my brows.

,,A group of three. Nic-"
I cut him off.

,,Don't just go up to anyone you see!" I try to be as quiet as possible to not wake up Cody. ,,People kill for anything these days, even for fun!"

John lifts his eyebrows. ,,They seemed more intimidated by me than anything, but anyway as I tried to say, nice people, two of them are infected. So, we had this small conversation and they said that they're headed to a fort that allows Silvers inside."

,,Silvers?"

,,Yeah." He smiles. ,,Apparently that's how infected people are called, and that fort even has a scientist that works on a cure or a vaccine."

Im not sure about the information he just told me.
,,It might be a trap."

,,Why?"

I swear if he is this trusting, then there is no hope for him.
,,Things changed John. People kill for supplies or fun for all I know. So, it's not a good idea to just trust everyone you meet. They might lead us to a trap or just kill us for supplies"

He is quiet for some time until he takes a deep breath. ,,They didn't say anything about the fort until I mentioned that I'm also traveling with 'Silvers'. They also seemed happy to invite us to join them."

I bit the inside of my cheek. Not liking the idea, I look at Cody who is still asleep. His opinion matters as well, so we need to wait until he wakes up.

As I get up John sit up straight.
,,I'm going to the city to look for supplies. You can cut the meat and let it dry or something. Ask Cody what he thinks when he wakes up, but I need more time to think about it."

He nodded, his smile falling a little as I climbed down to the ground and went into the city.
He did say that there are two infected in that group, but I'm still not sure about the idea of traveling with strangers.

A scientist? That also didn't seem very believable either and I still need to see if Eva is okay. I'm so close to her, so I will not give up.

Chapter 27

The sun is slowly setting as I finally make my way back towards the camp with all the items I could carry. I managed to find some chargers and batteries, as well as new clothes for us. I just hope that the new clothing will fit the boys, if not I will simply go look again tomorrow.

As I round a corner and finally spot the high school, I barely overlook a rather unsettling detail. Two people sit on the edge, talking as they watch the sun slowly set.

One of them is John but the other one is an unknown woman with blonde hair so light it almost appears white in the sunlight.
That's when I remember how he told me about meeting a group.

He did not...

Taking a deep breath, I start walking towards the school and once John notices me I frown and stop, crossing my arms.
The woman smiles and says something to him, he gets up and shrugs his shoulders, probably in response to whatever she said.
John climbs down and jogs to me.

As he is near me, he smiles apologetically.
,,Hey, Sio." He stops in front of me. ,,They purely on accident stumbled upon out camp and-"

,,And you just let them stay. Ignoring all the warning I said and my wish to talk about it before we decide." I mumble angrily, noticing that the woman is watching us.

,,Yeah, but I promise nothing will happen." He waves his hands Infront of him.

,,What about Cody? Did you ask about his opinion?"

John sighs and frowns. ,,Cody is a kid."

Oh, that got me angry.
,,A kid? You think that it matters how old he is? You should at least listen to how he feels about something! Especially about some strangers that he doesn't know and must share the same roof with. I'm sorry if it sounds insulting but you have no idea about this world. Maybe you knew how to live in the old world, but this? I said it before John, things changed, people changed, everything is different. You can't trust everyone."

,,Then how can I trust anyone if I don't get to know them?" He snaps, but quickly shakes his head. ,,You trust me, right? Then trust me when I say that they aren't bad people, sure I know them for less than half a day, but I can just tell."

I stared him in the eyes for a second before looking away. ,,If they steal anything or we end up dead it's your fault. Also, I found some new clothes and soap."

His brows furrowed and he jokingly smelled his shirt. ,,Do I really stink that much?"

,,Considering we didn't clean up in a while, we all reek."

He pouts as he slides his hands through his dark hair. ,,Shampoo would be nice."
With a roll of my hands, I reach behind me to one of the pockets and take out one of those small bottles of shampoo and hand it to him.
He takes it with wide eyes before smiling brightly and trying to grab my bag, but I simply walk towards the building.
The woman waves at me and as I get closer, I notice how her eyes resemble those of Cody and me. She must be infected.

John climbs up first and I go after him. Once I'm on top the three new people look my way, causing my stomach to turn.

,,Hey there." The oldest looking man lifts his hand in a greeting.
,,I'm Carl." He points at himself.

He looks to be in his early 50's and has a short beard and unkempt hair as well as glasses sitting on his nose. Average height and a beer

belly.

He then points at the woman that simply turns around.
,,That's Celine and this guy-" He points at the last member of his group that sits next to the fire with his hood up.

,,-is Dustin."

Dustin looks my way and once I see his eyes I feel like I've seen him somewhere before. His eyes scrunch before lifting his hand in a tired gesture.

,,Hey." He said and I nod, still uncertain about them.

,,This is Xiomara." John introduces me.

I scan the roof for Cody and find him sitting next to the roof John made, clutching a blanket that I see for the first time around his shoulders.
I sit next to him and rummaged through my bag, looking for the small gift I found for him.

As I do so the group of strangers and John talk, Well, mostly Carl and Celine.
,,So what's your plan?" Carl asks as Celine sits next to him.

,,For now, we're trying to get to the Crystal Falls fort. After that, I don't think we know." John answers as he sits down. ,,And you said that you're going to the fort up north, right? what was its name again."

,,Yes! Arborg Fort." Celine giddily replies and smiles. ,,Can't wait to see it. And to meet the people! You should totally go as well."

John looks at me and then at Cody.
,,We are planning to stay here until Cody gets better, then look for Sios friend."

I finally found the book and took it out, giving it to Cody who took it with confusion.
,,What is that?" He asks as he opens it, his eyes go wide as he opens

the book on a page with constellations.
,,Saw it and thought that you might like it." I say and take out 'new' clothes for him and for John. Cody is eagerly turning pages.

I noticed how his eyes no longer water that much, also the tremors seemed to be less frequent. That's good.

Dustin who is mostly quiet through the entire conversation, reaches into his pocket, drawing my attention. My muscles stiffen as he pulls out a hunting knife and he extends his arm to me.

Everyones eyes landed on him as he held the knife for me to take.
,,Took me a while to recognize you as when I saw you before you weren't one of the Silvers."

So I have met him before, but I just can't remember where.
,,Should I remember you?"

He snorted. ,,Nah, we didn't talk. You left this knife for me and Alex, but I think you were traveling with someone else back then."

Oh, now I remember him. He is one of the infected that we came across. But how did he get so far? Is he trying to find someone as well? And where is that another guy? Alex, he said?

,,Yeah. I remember now." I mumble and notice how everyone keeps staring as he holds the knife. ,,You can keep it."

He lowers his hand with a shrug. ,,If you say so."

Carl grins at Dustin. ,,Well look at you, making friends." He then shifts his attention to me. ,,I can tell that you don't trust us, and I can understand that. Silvers are the big talk lately and have some rumors going around, but the fort were going is trying the hardest to find a cure for the madness."

,,Madness?" Furrowing my brows the image of that woman from the city pops in my mind.

Carl nods with a sad look in his eyes. ,,Seems you aren't aware of it.

Silver Madness is a... well you could call it a phenomenon. Most Silvers have it but in different stages. The first stage is hard to notice, mostly looks like anger issues."

John snickers as he looks at me. ,,You may have it."

Carl shakes his head with a barely visible smile. ,,The worst stage is the third stage. Silvers that develop it sometimes experience blackouts during which they go completely... well mad you could say. We still don't know what causes the madness or how to stop it. To tell you the truth we still are researching the virus in the fog."

So the woman I came across had a blackout?
Cold shiver ran down my spine. I killed her, didn't I? The hit with that rock could've definitely kill that woman, and she still could live normally. She just experienced a blackout. The guilt washed over me like cold sweat, and I took a shaky breath to try calm down a bit.

,,Are you also one of the scientists?" I ask, avoiding everyone's eyes.

,,No, I'm not a scientist but I do work for them. I mostly deliver letters and notes for other forts and point Silvers in the direction of the fort."

Celine smiled a little. ,,I want to volunteer myself for bloodwork. Who knows maybe they will find a cure for the madness."

John looks over at her. ,,You have it?"

She nods, her smile falling a little.
,,I do, mine isn't as severe as some, but I do lose control sometimes. Carl had to knock me out once." She laughs awkwardly. ,,I don't remember it but apparently, I tried to shoot myself."

Dustin just sits comfortably as he looks over to the almost set sun. ,,I just tagged along."

Cody pulls at my sleeve with teary eyes.
,,Does that mean that there is a fort with more infected people like

us?"

I am a little lost with the answer, after all I don't really trust those people, but they do know more about the infection than me.
,,Probably."

Carl took out a flask and took a long sip. ,,I can mark the fort location on your map if you're not comfortable traveling with us or just need more time to decide."

John instantly grabbed his bag and took out the torn page of the atlas. Carl pressed his lips together as John passed him the map.

,,This is your map?" He asked as he grabs a pen out of his own bag and marks a dot on the page.

John looks at me and I motion my head to follow me as I get up.
,,Excuse us. I want to talk in private for a second."

,,Sure!" Celine smiles and sits down in my place next to Cody. He bashfully looks down as she starts talking about his new book, asking if she can see it.

John follows me to the roof corner.
,,What is it?"

,,As much as I don't trust them." I mumble. ,,I don't think that they're lying."

John smiles as he looks back at them.
,,See? I told you. So, what's the plan? I know you want to see your friend, but what after that? Apparently, some forts allow Silvers to stay but we never know how that fort will react."

I thought for a moment. He is right, I planned to go see Eva but haven't thought what to do after that. It is surely safer to travel with more people, but Celine said herself that she has blackouts. I'm not sure if Cody could develop the blackouts, I sure hope not. I definitely need to ask Carl if he knows when madness can develop.

,,Cody seems intrigued by the idea of the fort. I mean he did live in one with you, so maybe he misses the comfort of the fort's safety." I think out loud. ,,It might be a good idea that you go with them."

,,Wait, you're not going?" John stands up straighter. ,,You're not going alone. No way! What if something happens? What if-"

,,John." Cutting him off I look at Cody who points at something in the book as Celine listens with a never-fading smile. ,,Go with them- if Cody wants it of course- and I will go see if Eva is alright and when I make sure she's okay I will come find you."

He takes a deep breath and runs his hand through his hair. ,,I don't like this plan."

,,Think about it." I point towards Cody. ,,In a few days he will be well enough to travel and if we find a working bike I will be there and back in no time, besides I know how to survive out here. Besides, we should ask Cody. If he wants to go live in a fort and there is one that allows infected, then this is the best chance. If he wants to travel, then who am I to stop him?"

He thought about it for some time before looking me in the eyes. ,,But if he wants to go to the fort, who will make sure you eat?"

,,I can hunt for myself?" I point it out.

he stared at me for a solid second with the most disappointed eyes I had ever seen. ,,But you can't cook."

Ouch. I know I'm bad, but to say that I can't cook? Sure, I did burn the food several times and the dried meat I made was too salty, but I can't be that bad. Surely somewhere someone is even worse at cooking than me.
,,I will ignore that insult."

He smiled a little and walked towards the rest of the group.
,,Okay!" He clapped his hands together. ,,Carl, how far is the Arborg fort?"

He thinks for a moment. ,,Around 10 days. Maybe less."

John nods and shifts his gaze towards Cody.
,,Do you want to continue traveling or go to the fort?"

Cody looks at his brother with big eyes and stays quiet for a solid five seconds.
,,The fort."

John nods with a forced smile. ,,Fort it is then. Carl can we discuss this in the morning?"

,,Sure! Were happy to have you."

Autor note

Hello!

I want to thank everyone that gave some time to read some of this book even if it's not good.

I have good and bad news.

I'll start with the bad.
I'm discontinuing this book.
Due to big plot holes and other writing problems with this book I decided to end it.

The good news is that I'm rewriting the plot of this book and changing many things.
But unfortunately I've decided to push it behind other books I'm writing so I'm not sure when I'll start working on it.

I'm not sure when I'll unpublish this book.

Thank you for reading this short note and have a great time.